# Team 8

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What if Naruto had been selected for a different team? What if he'd had a different mentor? Who would guess the consequences would be so large?

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# The Power of Observation

Disclaimer – I own nothing, mores the pity.

Team 8

Chapter One

It had been a long night and Yuuhi Kurenai was exhausted.

She'd gotten an early start that morning, so she could scout out the potential new genins at the academy. An unusual number of talented students were taking the test this year, probably enough for three full teams. That was why the sandaime asked her to take on a genin team.

She'd worked independently for almost ten years, ever since that incident. She wasn't happy about being forced to work in a team again, but when the Hokage asks, he doesn't necessarily have to say please.

The fact that Sarutobi did so made him even harder to refuse.

The old man was actually very considerate of her feelings. He knew that this would be opening old wounds, ever since that tragedy…

She ground her teeth to avoid the memory, but only a truly skilled shinobi would note any change of expression. Likewise, no one at the Academy could have detected her presence as she observed the students go through their routines. After the sandaime's 'request', she decided to utilize the remaining days to observe the students. This was unusual, as most sensei jonins simply waited for the team assignments to be made, trusting the academy instructors to construct well-balanced teams.

Kurenai was not most jonins.

Sarutobi had asked her to revive an old tactical concept, and lead a team of reconnaissance specialists. The last one had come to grief, but she didn't think the concept itself was flawed. What happened to Nomaru, Mattai, and Kobaru-sensei had been a tragic accident. At least that was what she told herself on her good days.

On her bad days, her thoughts were much darker. Sometimes they flirted with treason. Of a sort, anyway. If her suspicions were correct, she wasn't alone in such thoughts, just in failing to act on them.

However, she'd been having good days recently, so she occupied herself by watching the potential genins, unheard and unseen. The Inuzuka kid almost sensed her presence during recess when the wind unexpectedly shifted, but she'd been able to move before he could smell her.

Mostly she watched them talk and play. She noticed an unusual number of children from prominent shinobi families. Just like their parents, a Nara, a Yamanaka, and an Akimichi were all set to graduate together. If they all passed, there was little doubt they'd be placed on a team together. People liked to stick with what worked. It was just too bad for the boys that the Yamanaka girl looked to be an incredible shrew.

She saw a few prospects for a recon team. There was an Aburame kid who was so quiet the instructors tended to lose track of him. If he was any good with his bugs he'd be a resource for any team. She'd worked on occasion with a man who was probably this Shino boy's father. His 'little friends' always warned them of approaching enemies, giving them plenty of time to change position. The Inuzuka boy undoubtedly had a good nose like most of his family, as would his dog. He was a little loud, and a bit of a braggart though.

There was also a Hyuuga there, and Kurenai recognized the girl, Hinata, that she'd escorted to the academy years ago. She'd done a tour at the Academy while recovering from her wounds and preparing for the jonin exam.

She'd been dispatched to the Hyuuga compound in response to a request from the clan head, Hyuuga Hiashi. The man coldly informed her that his daughter was hopelessly weak and unable to master more than the basics of the Hyuuga gentle fist taijitsu style. It was hoped that she'd be of some use to the village as a shinobi if she was too weak to serve the family directly. The fact that he told her this in front of the silent girl sorely tested Kurenai's patience.

Of course, she expected no less from the leader of the white-eyed bastards. Aside from that silent girl, she'd never seen a member of that prestigious family that wasn't stuck up and arrogant. Well, Mattai wasn't like that, but it wasn't really the same. Remembering her old comrade always brought a pang, and she needed her concentration to focus on the quiet girl.

As if in reaction against the rest of her family's arrogance, the Hyuuga girl was still painfully shy and timid. She sat by herself and kept her head down so much it took Kurenai a while to confirm she actually had the Byakugan eyes her family was famed for. The only time the girl seemed to perk up at all was when the class troublemaker came tearing past, being chased by the Yamanaka girl and some pink-haired kunoichi-in-training that had to be a Haruno.

Kurenai was a genin fresh out of the academy when the Kyuubi attacked Konoha. She and most of her friends were assigned to areas of the battlefield far from the worst of the fighting, which was probably the only reason any of them had survived that night. She didn't have any personal animosity against the child the fourth had sealed the demon fox into. It wasn't like the little gaki had asked for it.

Still, this Uzumaki Naruto seemed to be quite a handful. He was always pulling pranks, though never anything really mean or hurtful. Mostly he just seemed a little starved for attention. Unfortunately, that was something most of the academy instructors seemed unwilling to give him. To his credit, Umino Iruka seemed to be the least prejudiced of the lot: his irritation seemed to be focused more on the boy's poor study habits and hell-raising.

At least his antics were occasionally entertaining. He did show a lot of creativity in his mischief, and the reactions of those around him also gave Kurenai some insight into their personalities.

Unfortunately, it looked like his lack of focus had caught up with him that afternoon, during the genin exam. A fair number of his classmates ran out of the building afterward, proudly displaying their new Hitai-ite, but the blond haired boy just trudged over to the swings and sat there, the picture of dejection.

Kurenai was surprised to note that someone else was watching the boy as well. The Hyuuga girl stared at him from behind a post. She was obviously distraught - blushing and pushing her forefingers together in a nervous gesture. At the same time, the girl stood up straighter than Kurenai had ever seen her. She fidgeted behind the post, stepping out from behind it only to step back again without doing anything. From what Kurenai could see, the girl's cheeks were bright red.

The jonin smiled to herself as she slipped away. With no curse seal, the girl was obviously of the Hyuuga main family. For such a one to be attracted to a ruffian like the one who bore the kyuubi was an ineradicable smear on her family's honor.

Good for her.

The thought cheered Kurenai as she made her way to the Hokage's tower. The Sandaime and the new jonin sensei would be meeting with the academy instructors to go over the test results and decide how to split the new genins into effective teams.

It was nearly nightfall by the time all the jonins arrived, mostly due to Hatake Kakashi's chronic tardiness. She understood the reasons for his frequent diversions all too well, but that was not a good reason to make everyone wait for over an hour. Although she supposed the same could be said of her violent dislike of the Hyuuga clan.

The first bit of bad news was that only eight students had passed the genin test. That meant one team would be short a student, or they would be forming two four person teams. Kurenai wondered if she'd be let off the hook, but Sarutobi soon scuttled that hope. He said he didn't think the best of jonins could give four students sufficient attention for their development. The jonins sometimes whispered on drinking nights that the old man still blamed himself for Orochimaru's betrayal of Konoha. No sane person blamed the old man for his grown student's actions, but Kurenai knew quite well that guilt follows no logic but it's own.

No sooner had they settled that question and began wrangling over who would only have two genins than a messenger arrived. It seemed that someone had broken into the Sandaime's quarters and made off with a scroll of forbidden jutsus. No one was sure who had done it, but Uzumaki Naruto had been seen in the vicinity just before the break-in was noticed.

Umino Iruka went pale as a ghost when he heard this news, confirming to Kurenai's eye that the man did care something about the unwanted child. He immediately rushed out to join the search for the boy.

"How did Naruto do in the examination?" the Sandaime asked one of the academy record-keepers.

"He did not pass, Hokage-sama," the man asked without even checking his scroll.

"If he was able to break into the Hokage's office and make off with a heavily guarded scroll… it makes me wonder how hard that test is," Asuma grumbled sourly. He'd been forbidden to smoke inside and Kurenai was sure he was suffering from lack of nicotine.

Sarutobi seemed unusually unconcerned about the missing scroll, so after he went up to his office they instead sat around discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the genins as they looked through the

reports. It seemed a little odd to do this when neither of the senior instructors were present.

Kakashi volunteered to oversee the training of the Uchiha survivor, which made sense given his use of a sharingan eye. He also was willing to only have two students. This was presumably so he could devote more time to Uchiha Sasuke, but Kurenai wondered how much of that was just laziness. It seemed to her that the more skilled the ninja, the more eccentric their personal habits became. It also made her wonder if her own ambitions to improve her skills would become ultimately self-destructive. The copy-cat ninja was feared throughout the ninja world, but he was also squirrelly as hell with his chronic tardiness and perverted reading material.

In fact his fingers were reaching for the corner of a brightly colored book protruding from his flak vest when Sarutobi led Iruka back into the room, the latter missing his hitai-ite.

"It looks like we have a ninth graduate," the chuunin gasped after sitting down. He looked like he'd been in a nasty brawl – he was covered with cuts and scrapes, including a really large gouge in the middle of his back.

"What happened, Iruka?" Maybe it was Kurenai's imagination, but the slight smile the Hokage wore indicated he knew more than he let on.

"It was Mizuki that betrayed us, Hokage-sama. When Naruto couldn't produce a good bunshin, he failed the jutsu portion of the exam. Mizuki told him that stealing the scroll and bringing it to him would count as extra credit and allow him to still pass the exam."

"He fell for that?" Kakashi asked in surprise. "And we're considering making him a ninja why?

"If students cannot trust their sensei, who can they trust?" Iruka asked stiffly. "We cannot punish him for listening to a teacher, can we?" He turned toward the Hokage with the last question.

The Sandaime nodded gravely. "I agree. If we cannot guarantee the loyalty of the people who teach our children, we cannot blame them for doing no better than we." He looked at Iruka for a second. "What happened to your forehead protector?"

Umino Iruka smiled proudly. "I gave it to Naruto for passing the exam. He'd failed to produce a simple bunshin, but when he was defending me from Mizuki's attacks he revealed that he'd learned Kage Bunshin no Jutsu and filled that whole section of the forest with clones. I literally lost count."

"But Kage Bunshin is much harder to perform!" Asuma protested.

Iruka shrugged happily. "That's why I passed him. He's quite surprising."

"Well then, it looks like we have three full size teams now," Sarutobi said with a faint smile. Most of the jonins knew he sympathized with the boy's lack of family. "Kakashi, if you will take Naruto, that will-"

"Your pardon, Hokage-sama," Kurenai broke in. She'd been thinking about the Hyuuga girl. With her bloodline, she had tremendous potential, but her confidence issues were worrisome. Now she saw a possible way around them. "I wouldn't mind having Naruto on my team."

"Are you sure of that?" Sarutobi asked. She also saw Asuma and some of the academy workers quietly shaking their heads. "I understand your team is to specialize in reconnaissance missions, and Naruto doesn't show a lot of potential in that area."

"Or any other," she thought she saw one of the record keepers mouth to his co-worker. Iruka shifted painfully in his seat to glare at them.

"After what happened to my genin team," she said coolly, "I'd prefer that my new team not be overly specialized. If they fall into a trap," she continued, giving the last word a slightly sarcastic emphasis that

made the Sandaime wince, "it would do well to have someone with the ability to get us out of a perilous situation. A genin capable of filling the woods with kage bunshin would be able to provide quite a distraction, wouldn't he? Besides, I also seem to remember a large number of chuunins, jonins, and ANBU pursuing that boy after he decorated the Hokage monument. He led you on quite a chase, didn't he?"

Several faces in the room looked a bit sheepish after that. Iruka, on the other hand, appeared happy that someone was recognizing his pupil's abilities. Of course, he was also the one who eventually caught the boy.

She turned toward Kakashi. "Kiba is passable with his taijitsu, but he also spends a lot of time working with Akamaru. They work well together and might give your students an example of the teamwork you seem to prize. Psychologically, the Inuzuka boy is like most of his family and very pack, er, group-oriented. He's a little boisterous, but friendly enough he might be able to thaw out that Uchiha headcase."

Kurenai noticed that everyone in the room was staring at her. She sighed. "When I was selected to mentor a genin team, I decided to spend a few days observing them interact and getting a handle on their personalities. Am I the only jonin in this room that bothers to think ahead?"

Kakashi was reading his book and Asuma was fiddling with his cigarette. Evidently, she was.

She sighed and laid her face in her hands. "Fine, then. Just take my word for it. The Uchiha kid is a self-centered brat and you're going to have your work cut out for you."

"Hmmm…" Sarutobi grunted. "I would think Naruto would be able to warm him up a bit better. And it is traditional that the highest and lowest-ranked genins be placed on the same team to balance it out."

"Perhaps," Kurenai agreed. "But I think that kid's been through enough without sticking him on a team with two people who won't appreciate him, and neither Haruno nor Uchiha respect him at all… Besides, given what he did tonight, I'm not sure I agree with his assessment results."

The third Hokage nodded thoughtfully. "You think he will do better on your team?"

"Aburame Shino seems neutral toward the boy, which is better than the outright disparagement he receives from other students. Hyuuga Hinata would be his friend if she were not so shy." Kurenai paused for a moment before continuing. "I believe that if your law mandating secrecy regarding the jinchuuriki were to be strictly enforced, all of the academy students would be made orphans."

Yuuhi Kurenai was quite sure that, were she to drop a senbon, the clatter when it struck the floor would have been deafening in that silence.

"That is ridiculous!" One of the academy workers snapped. "I have never heard one whisper of the Kyuubi in all the time I have worked here. No parent has told their child of it!"

"No," Kurenai drawled, "they instead tell their children to hate Uzumaki Naruto and shun him for no reason they will admit. You don't hide a secret by drawing attention to it with bright lights and dancing around it doing everything you can get away with that doesn't involve saying the forbidden words."

Sarutobi sighed and sagged in his chair for a moment. Kurenai was reminded how old he actually was, and how he'd been enjoying his retirement up until his successor was forced to sacrifice his life to seal the Kyuubi. She felt a stab of shame that she'd reminded him of how little some of the villagers deserved his protection.

"Anyway," she continued in a kinder voice, "I think the gaki has a lot of potential. If I can bring it out, he may one day become a

formidable shinobi."

"That may be a lot of work," Iruka said in a cautious voice. Kurenai's eye caught him wincing a little, obviously torn by his loyalty to the boy. She considered that a point in his favor.

"It will be worth it to prevent any more… accidents," she said in little more than a whisper. Even Kakashi managed to look uncomfortable, for all that his mask hid.

"Very well," the Hokage said in a quiet voice. "I will want weekly reports on the boy's progress and his physical and mental state."

Kurenai nodded. She expected as much.

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Hyuuga Hinata had not slept well that night. Yesterday had been the last day she'd likely see Naruto in a long time. She passed her Genin Exam, but he would be staying at the academy for remedial classes until he could pass. He tried so hard that it broke her heart to see him fail. For once, his smiling mask had slipped and he'd walked outside like a broken down old man.

And still she failed to say anything to the boy who inspired her so much with his attitude and ever-present smile. Her father was right – she was a useless coward. Not brave enough to do more than hide and watch him like some pathetic stalker.

She'd always been a little embarrassed for the sillier kunoichis who chased Uchiha Sasuke around like a miniature fan club. But in the end, was she any better? She was just as hare-brained and silly, and even more cowardly. Those girls at least had the courage to let Sasuke know that they liked him. Not even the prospect of not seeing Naruto anymore could make her act, and she despised herself for it.

She'd been too upset at herself to even think of eating breakfast, and her steps faltered as she slowly walked to the Konoha Ninja

Academy for the last time. Her only consolation was the possibility that she might see Naruto there again today. It was fairly common for students who failed the Genin Exam to stay home the following day – it was painful and embarrassing to see your classmates who were leaving to become full-fledged shinobi, even if they were only reporting to a different room for team assignments. But then again, Naruto seldom did the usual thing. The prospect of seeing him again, even if it would be the last time in a long while, buoyed her spirit. Maybe today she would find the courage to actually speak to him.

Her steps quickened as hope slowly leaked into her heart. She soon made her way into the academy building and found the classroom where the new genins were assembled.

Her classmates were spread out in their usual disarray, but Naruto was there as well, with his head down on a desk. She froze in shock as she walked in the door, but then her feet automatically led her to one of her usual seats; high up and near the door in the back – everyone ahead of her and no one behind. She stared at the boy, wondering if someone would come in and tell him to leave. Finally, Nara Shikamaru ambled into the room and stopped by Naruto's table. When he asked Naruto why he was there, the blond boy sat up and said he'd passed, showing off his new hitai-ite. "Naruto-kun graduated too," she whispered to herself.

Then Ino and Sakura burst into the room, arguing about who arrived first. Naruto stared in her direction, his face lighting up, and Hinata felt her heart skip a beat. But then the pink-haired kunoichi walked by her and she realized Naruto was looking at her instead.

"Ohayo, Sakura-chan!" Naruto greeted her with a smile as she approached.

"Out of my way!" Sakura snarled as she elbowed him to the floor so she could sit next to Uchiha Sasuke.

An unpleasant voice in Hinata's head said it was glad that the girl Naruto seemed to like did not return his affections. But for the most

part, she was dismayed to see him treated so cavalierly. Then Ino contested Sakura's right to sit in the chair she'd just thrown poor Naruto out of. In moments, most of the girls in the room were arguing over the evicted seat while Naruto was still sprawled at their feet.

Naruto climbed up on the desk and glared at Sasuke, again attracting the ire of Sasuke's fan club. Even worse, an inattentive boy at the table in front of them bumped into Naruto, making his and Sasuke's faces meet. It was hard to tell from where she sat, but from the screams of outrage that followed immediately afterward, it seems the two boys had inadvertently kissed. Hinata thought it was somewhat funny, especially the way the two boys carried on afterwards, spitting and gagging like they'd been poisoned.

The Sasuke Fan Club ™ on the other hand, was incensed at Naruto's forward behavior – not to mention quite jealous. The beating they gave Naruto was well out of proportion to his actual offense. Hinata grew worried as they showed no signs of stopping. She pushed back her chair and was about to intervene when Iruka-sensei entered the room and broke it up. Poor Naruto looked like he'd been run over by a farmer's wagon.

When Iruka-sensei announced that the teams had been chosen, Hinata began pressing her index fingers together as her thoughts raced. *I might be on a team with Naruto-kun. I might not be on a team with Naruto-kun.* Those two thoughts kept repeating as the instructor worked his way down the list.

"Team Seven: Inuzuka Kiba, Haruno Sakura, and Uchiha Sasuke."

Sakura looked ecstatic as Ino's face fell. Naruto also seemed horribly disappointed, and Hinata couldn't help but feel sorry for him, even though her own hopes were rising.

"Team Eight: Hyuuga Hinata, Uzumaki Naruto, and Aburame Shino."

Naruto's expression didn't change, but Hinata thought her heart would explode out of her chest. She knew her racing pulse was

making her cheeks flush, but she couldn't help it. Not only had Naruto passed, but they would be together on the same team. This was rapidly becoming one of the happiest days of her life, definitely the happiest since her mother died.

When the team assignments were completed, they were given a long lunch break, as their jonin instructors would be meeting with them that afternoon. Sasuke immediately got up and stalked out of the room, Sakura trailing behind him. Kiba grunted as he stood up, frowning at already being left behind by his team.

Naruto stared after Sakura, and sat in silence after she left. Hinata felt ashamed that she'd been happy he was on her team instead of Sakura's. She was an awful person if she took joy from the sadness of someone she admired. She looked down at her hands and began pressing her fingers again. She was too ashamed to look up as Naruto left the room.

After a while she got up and went outside. She saw Aburame Shino sitting on a bench near the playground. Determined to get to know her other teammate, Hinata sat down on the other end of the bench from the silent boy.

"Ano… I understand we are to be teammates," she said in a quiet voice.

The Aburame genius turned toward her, his face expressionless – what little of it she could see behind the high collar and the dark glasses he wore. "Hai," he said in little more than a whisper. He then turned back and Hinata realized he was studying an ant hill that had been constructed in front of the bench.

Hinata blinked and began unpacking her lunch. She thought of offering some to her teammate. She tended to bring more than she needed, on the off chance that one day Naruto would forget to bring his usual cup ramen. Alas, she never had the chance to share her food with him… not that she would've had the courage to approach him, she reproached herself bitterly.

Shino, however, had also brought food. It was a little disconcerting to see his kikai bugs swarming onto the dish as they consumed a portion of his rice and fish. They confined themselves to one corner of the square container as Shino's chopsticks fed their host.

Hinata bit into a rice ball and wondered what she could do. She'd never been in this position before, trying to converse with someone who was even quieter than she was. "Ano… which jonin do you think we will be assigned to?"

Shino turned toward her again. He seemed to stare at her for a long moment, making her fingers fidget even faster. "Given our abilities, I would think one of the scouting specialists. Uzumaki's presence is troubling though."

Hinata took a deep breath. "I'm sure he will work very hard to make us successful," she said in as firm a voice as she could muster.

Shino simply regarded her for several heartbeats before answering. "Perhaps. But he doesn't possess a bloodline or sensory abilities. I question what role he could perform, or if he was simply placed here to keep him out of the way."

Hinata felt her stomach contract into a small, hard ball. She always questioned whether she would actually be useful as a ninja or not. Was Team 8 just a place for throwaway ninjas? Had she and Naruto been placed here to keep them out of the way? But what about Shino? He was supposed to be the pride of the Aburame clan, the best bug user they'd produced in over a generation. "Ano… I don't think we're a team for shinobi that no one wants. Naruto works very hard when he trains by himself, and he still received a hitai-ite. "

Shino turned back toward his lunch. "That may have been done to remove him from the academy. There is something about him that the adults do not like. My clan will not speak of it, but they do not hold him in high regard."

While Hinata was glad that Shino was speaking more, his words disturbed her. She remembered the way her father's face twisted when one of Naruto's pranks was mentioned at dinner. The branch family retainer blanched under Otousan's furious glare, and for an instant Hinata thought his cursed seal had been activated. Hinata may not have been the ideal Hyuuga warrior, but even without her Byakugan active, she was still intelligent and above all, observant. As such, the looks some of the adults gave the object of her affections did not escape her notice. "Surely they don't hate him for pulling a few pranks? Naruto-kun never hurt anyone, not even by accident."

"I believe it's something deeper than that. I've heard his name mentioned in passing even before the first time he defaced the Hokage Monument," Shino replied.

Hinata was too involved in their conversation to wonder at how her teammate seemed to have finally discovered that he had a voice. Later, she would wonder if it was the teasing apart of a mystery that finally engaged him, or if it was simply the fact that someone was actively seeking to speak with him. Hinata wasn't especially fond of insects, but they didn't creep her out like they did some girls. "What else could he have done to become so unpopular?" she asked, frowning.

"It may not be anything he did," Shino replied. "I don't know of another Uzumaki in the village, so he may have come from a family that disgraced themselves in some fashion. Hokage-sama wouldn't execute a child for the crimes of the parents, no matter how heinous. The villagers may not be so forgiving."

Hinata sat there, her mind racing as a half-eaten rice ball fell back into her bentou. As far as she knew, Naruto-kun had no parents, and was forced to live alone as there was no one who would take him in. To think that he would still be blamed for the actions of people he'd never met made her feel very strangely. It was similar to the tight feeling she got when Otousan told her Hanabi would make a better

heir and how she at least could make him proud… but the emotion gripping her right now was much stronger.

Hyuuga Hinata was angry. These people deliberately hurt her Naruto-kun with their cold eyes. The boy with the big dreams who always smiled and tried again no matter what – he deserved better than that. She'd seen his smile slip a few times, the most recently after the Genin Exam, and even if she was too cowardly to say anything to him, his sorrow still stabbed her heart like a kunai. After a moment she was able to master her new emotions and don the sterile mask she was taught a Hyuuga must always present to others. "That is very foolish of them," she said coldly, "since he is going to be Hokage some day."

Shino didn't say anything, but turned back to his lunch. While he didn't necessarily sound like he agreed with her, Hinata would settle for a lack of overt disagreement. They finished their meal in silence and returned to the academy to await their sensei.

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Naruto sat at his desk with his head in his hands. The ache in his stomach was finally subsiding, but the pain in his heart was worse. It wasn't fair that Sakura was assigned to a different team, and even worse that she was partnered up with that Uchiha-teme.

When he saw Sasuke eating his lunch, Naruto was struck by inspiration. This might be his last chance to find out what Sakura really thought of him. Fortunately, the overconfident jerk was surprisingly easy to subdue. So much for genius. The look on his face when the kawarimi log appeared in a cloud of smoke and half a dozen clones descended on him like the wrath of Kami was the high point of Naruto's day. After that it was simply a matter of tying the fool up and using Henge no Jutsu to copy his appearance.

He found Sakura where he'd left her – scorning his presence and mooning after Sasuke-teme. He didn't think she could really be that cruel – not when she was so beautiful and smiled so sweetly. The way her face lit up as he approached made the breath catch in his

throat, and for a moment he almost forgot that she was reacting to Sasuke's appearance, not his own.

After a moment, he remembered his plan and sat down on the stone bench next to her. He tried to copy Sasuke's patented slouch and glower, and it seemed to work. Sakura smiled shyly and blushed.

"So," Naruto said, trying to sound disinterested. "What's the deal with that Naruto boy who seems to like you? He's always greets you warmly every morning and you usually bash him on the head."

Sakura looked confused for a moment before giggling. "That Naruto, he's always such a pain. He doesn't really understand me, and he's always interfering with my plans." She sighed. "At least he's not on a team with us, and after today I won't ever have to look at him again. Aren't you relieved as well, Sasuke-kun?"

Naruto didn't trust his voice at that moment as he felt his heart shrivel up and blow away. He just grunted and stood up again. He slouched away as Sakura called after him. He refused to acknowledge her confused cries. Maybe she might come to know how it feels. Not that she cared. He was halfway to the academy building when his stomach began cramping violently.

Naruto did raise his head when he felt a presence full of killing intent enter the classroom. Sasuke didn't look at him directly as he stalked over to an empty seat, but Naruto could feel the anger radiating from the boy. Naruto also knew the stuck up Uchiha wouldn't say a word about what happened – he'd sooner die than admit that the 'dead last' had beaten him down in a fight. While he had been taken by surprise, it was no excuse for someone that was trained in the ninja arts… let alone the almighty Uchiha genius.

Naruto didn't even look directly at the boy, who also ignored Sakura's confused expression. "Those two deserve each other," he thought bitterly. "She just seems to irritate him, and now she'll get a chance to see how it's like to be ignored and despised."

His mind was so wrapped up in his misery that he almost missed Iruka calling out for Team 8. He stood up and sullenly shuffled over to the teacher's desk. Iruka frowned at him as he joined Hinata and Shino. Iruka-sensei introduced a tall woman with shoulder-length black hair and red eyes. "This is Yuuhi Kurenai. She will be your jonin instructor. Good luck to all of you." Iruka smiled when Naruto nodded and straightened the hitai-ite that Iruka had given him.

Kurenai smiled faintly, but her eyes were watchful as she led them outside. Hinata smiled at him, a little hesitantly. Naruto actually respected her for being one of the few girls in their class that didn't spend all their time fawning over Uchicha-teme. Shino was a little odd. He didn't talk much, just the opposite of Naruto, but the other kids avoided him because of the bugs, which was something they had in common. Naruto didn't mind bugs, as long as they didn't try to get into his food. His live-and-let-live attitude ended where his ramen began.

As he walked out the door, Naruto found himself looking back at Kiba, Sasuke, and Sakura, who were still waiting for their jonin instructor to show up. He took a deep breath and turned his back on them, leaving with his new team.

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Kurenai didn't miss the blond boy's backward glance as she led them out of the classroom. "He must be disappointed he wasn't teamed with that Haruno girl," she concluded to herself, "not that she ever gave him the time of day. Was I ever that young and stupid? Surely not."

She spoke aloud after leading them out to the playground. "Now, I'd like to get to know each of you, so please tell me a little about yourselves." It was better to handle introductions in a familiar place, to put them all at ease. "I'll begin. I am Yuuhi Kurenai, and I became a jonin after the last exam. I'm a specialist with various types of genjutsu. I like to study human psychology, sing karaoke, and work in my garden. I dislike loud drunks and people who think I can't be an effective ninja because I'm a woman. My ambition is to prove that

a reconnaissance specialized team can be successful and to see all three of you become jonins."

Naruto looked at each of his less-than-talkative teammates and then cleared his throat. "I'm Uzumaki Naruto. I like ramen. I hate how long it takes to make instant ramen and stuck up bastards like Sasuke-teme. My ambition is to one day become Hokage."

When neither Shino or Hinata showed signs of speaking up, Naruto nudged the Aburame boy. Shino's head snapped around at Naruto so quickly the blond flinched back. Kurenai wondered if the bug-user was used to any sort of human contact. "I am Aburame Shino. I like to study insects and find new varieties that haven't been catalogued by my family yet. I dislike people who kill insects for no reason. My ambition is to learn all of the Aburame bloodline jutsus and then develop my own techniques using my allies."

Once the taller boy finished, everyone looked toward Hinata, who appeared to be ready to sink into the ground without the benefit of a Doton jutsu. "A-ano… I am Hyuuga Hinata. I like cheerful people… who are kind. I dislike… people who hurt others… for no reason. My ambition is to become stronger so I will be acknowledged by my father… and someone else."

Kurenai nodded thoughtfully. Shino was just as focused, or obsessed, as she thought. Hinata's home life was probably just as bad as she'd imagined from watching her. Naruto's focus was scattered all over the place, which was also about what she expected. He was going to need a lot of work, and the sooner she started the better. "Very good. Now, are you all familiar with training ground number nineteen?" she asked, specifying a variable-terrain space set aside along the southern border of the village. When all three of them nodded she continued. "Good. We're going to do a short skill assessment. Meet me there as quickly as you can." With that, her hands blurred into a seal and she disappeared in a sudden swirl of wind-blown leaves.

As soon as the substitution technique was finished, Kurenai took off for the designated training area at her best speed, leaping from roof to roof and tree to tree. With her advanced chakra control, she could feed a trickle of energy into her legs, allowing her to reach incredible speeds as she traveled overhead.

Surprisingly, she barely beat Naruto there. All that being chased after pranking had to pay off somehow. The boy had incredible stamina, just as she suspected. He was blowing hard and sweating when he arrived, but his color and respiration normalized in less than three minutes. It's not like he could ever use stealth to escape from pursuers, not with that bright orange jumpsuit.

Shino arrived a few minutes later, followed shortly by a badly-winded Hinata.

"I can see we're going to need to work on speed and endurance both," Kurenai said, frowning.

"Is that because we're going to be a reconnaissance team?" Shino asked.

"Yes and no," Kurenai answered. "Moving quickly is especially important for successfully completing a scouting mission. However, endurance training will also help increase your chakra reserves, which will in turn improve your taijutsu and make your ninjutsus easier to use."

Shino and Hinata nodded at this. Naruto just looked confused. "What do you all mean by a reconnaissance team?" he finally asked.

Kurenai nodded to acknowledge his question. If the boy had as hard a time in the academy as she thought, she didn't want him to be reluctant to ask her for information. "That's a very good question, Naruto. When genins are selected for teams, it's common practice to put members together who have powers that compliment each other. For example, Team 10 has a Nara, a Yamanaka, and an Akimichi. Their fathers all worked together as well. The Nara and Yamanaka

bloodlines are especially useful for capturing or immobilizing people, and Akimichis excel at grappling techniques. Furthermore, the Akimichis have some special attacks that are truly devastating, but somewhat easy to avoid."

Naruto frowned for a moment. "So Ino and Shikamaru hold them while Chouji pounds them?"

Kurenai nodded. "That's one way their abilities compliment each other. Now a reconnaissance team has members whose abilities make them especially well suited for finding the enemy or discovering their secrets. Sometimes that information is more valuable than gold – being able to adequately prepare for the enemy has decided more wars than any fighting technique or jutsu."

"Ano, K-kurenai-sensei," Hinata spoke up, "how do my, I mean our abilities make us suited for such a role?"

"That's also a very good question, Hinata. Your Byakugan eyes are an obvious asset. You can see for very long distances and through light cover when you activate them. With proper positioning, you can see into a commander's tent and read his battle plans with no one being the wiser. Shino's bugs can also be invaluable when seeking out the enemy. I've worked with members of his clan before, and the kikai bugs have an excellent sense of smell. They also make good sentries. When deployed around the team, they can alert us if an enemy patrol is approaching. One of the greatest hazards of getting close to the enemy is the chance that they will stumble over you and attack."

Kurenai paused, thinking about how to phrase what she wanted to say next. Naruto, however, noticed the incompleteness of her response.

"Sensei, what role do I play?" he asked, his eyebrows drawn down in a frown.

Kurenai sighed. "I won't lie to you. The scouting missions our team will likely be assigned will be dangerous. That is why I don't want this team to be over specialized in that role. Naruto, if the worst happens and we are discovered deep in enemy territory, your job will be to buy us time to escape. Your… unexpected… skill with Kage Bunshin makes you well suited toward distracting pursuers so we can successfully disengage."

"So it's all about running away?" Naruto asked, sticking out his lower lip.

"Yes, it is," Kurenai answered sharply. "Because completing your mission is what shinobi do. Proving who's tougher is a schoolyard game. Staying to fight when the Hokage needs our information isn't just stupid, it's treasonous. Ninjas who don't learn that lesson usually die as fools. Their names won't even be carved onto the memorial stone because they threw their lives away, rather than sacrificing them for something meaningful."

Everyone grew quiet after that. Kurenai gave them a moment to digest that, then set them to work on basic taijutsu drills. Hinata proved to be the best of the bunch. Her form was almost perfect, and her movements were swift and precise. While she may lack somewhat in power and speed, that would come as she got older. Shino's taijutsu was workmanlike, not particularly inspired, but she was sure he practiced it more for the chakra enhancement than anything else. More chakra meant more energy for his bugs. Naruto's stances were awful and his form was unbelievably sloppy. At the same time, he was blindingly fast and seemed to pull off the wall moves out of thin air. When he sparred with Shino, he proved unusually adept at using the terrain to his advantage, ricocheting off an overhanging branch to land a kick on the taller boy's head.

Kurenai scowled as she realized why his hand to hand skills were so undisciplined. With no friends and no parents, he could only practice outside of school by himself. He was probably going to one of the training grounds and trying to teach himself the more advanced taijutsu moves, possibly after watching older ninjas train. It was a

wonder he wasn't worse. She considered her possibilities as she watched Shino knock the smaller boy down for the fifth time in a row.

"Yamete! That's enough." The boys separated and she noticed that after two deep breaths Naruto didn't even appear to have been exercising at all. Taijutsu wasn't one of her strengths, but she did know someone who was quite good… and Gai had been asking her for tips on teaching his genins how to recognize advanced genjutsus.

She then had them demonstrate some of their preferred ninjutsus. Shino used his kikai bugs to turn a log into a pile of sawdust in less than a minute. Hinata did a henge of Kurenai that was picture perfect – until the shy and hesitant body language immediately revealed the imposter. Naruto leapt to his feet when it was his turn and called out "Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!" in an enthusiastic voice.

There was a loud pop and two more Narutos appeared on either side of him. Both looked rather pale and sickly. One immediately ran behind some bushes and began making retching sounds. Kurenai felt the burst of malformed chakra when Naruto fired off his technique – she was actually surprised he produced anything at all. The other sickly twin broke wind so violently that he disappeared with a puff of smoke.

"Very impressive," Shino said in a deadpan voice. "I'm sure if we're about to be captured they will be quite a diversion."

"Kuso!" Naruto cursed. His reddened face screwed up in a rictus of concentration, he formed the Ram seal again and roared "KAGE BUNSHIN NO JUTSU!" at the top of his lungs. Kurenai felt the hairs on the back of her neck stir as she felt the massive surge of chakra being shaped.

At first Kurenai thought her eyes were blurring, but that was just the shimmer that preceded the shadow duplicates as they popped into existence. The fact that the blurring covered most of her field of vision was because Naruto had filled the clearing with clones. She heard Iruka describe how Mizuki had been beaten to within an inch

of his life, but it was quite another thing to see a genin use a jonin-level jutsu to create almost a hundred duplicates of himself. The gaki had a right to stand there proudly with his arms folded across his chest. Especially since he didn't look like he was about to collapse from chakra depletion.

Shino's eyebrows had become visible over his glasses; while Hinata's pearly eyes had gone wide as a blush reddened her cheeks.

"That's more like it," Kurenai said warmly. Naruto blinked and scratched at the back of his head in embarrassed pleasure. Inside, she was saddened. For the boy to react so strongly to a simple compliment… It said a lot about his early life, none of it pleasant. Her respect for the Sandaime had also taken a hit. The boy deserved a lot better than he'd gotten.

Naruto set his clones to sparring one another while Kurenai gestured for them to sit down. She ignored the errant clone that made a rude gesture at Shino's back, causing Hinata to stifle a giggle.

"That was a very interesting display, all of you. Tonight and tomorrow I'll be putting together some training plans for all three of you. We'll meet here at noon to discuss these, and then we will report to the Hokage for our first mission. So go home and get a good night's sleep."

"Yatta!" Naruto yelled, leaping to his feet. "Our first mission!" He struck a 'V for Victory' pose that made Kurenai and Hinata smile. Shino did not react, at least not visibly.

As Hinata and Shino left, Kurenai tapped Naruto's shoulder. The boy shied away from the unexpected touch in a way she found disconcerting. "I'd like to talk to you about a couple of things," she said in a quiet voice.

Naruto looked at his teammates, who were already out of earshot. He let out a resigned sigh and shrugged. Kurenai suppressed the

urge to try out some phrases she'd picked up from Asuma. Instead, she put on what she hoped was a reassuring smile. "Come on," she said. "I'll buy you dinner while we talk."

Naruto brightened as they began walking.

"But no ramen."

He frowned.

"If you eat nothing but noodles, it's no wonder you're the shortest kid in your class. Don't you know if you don't eat right it will stunt your growth?"

Now the boy looked horrified.

Kurenai sighed. "I don't mean never eat it again. But if you don't get some vegetables and a good amount of protein and dairy products in your diet, you'll never achieve your full growth."

"I drink milk every day," he said defensively.

"That's a good start, but you still need protein, and vegetables contain vitamins you can't get anywhere else. It's a wonder you don't have rickets or scurvy."

"Nani?"

"Those are malnutrition-related diseases that sailors used to get when they went on long voyages without proper food."

"How do you know so many things?" he asked as they left the training area and re-entered the village.

"I'm a jouinin." It was easier than explaining that she was an insomniac who read half the night. Reading was a lot easier on her mind than thinking about Mattai.

As they walked, Kurenai noticed the subtle glares and sneers the villagers directed toward her student. She began returning the glares, and made a point of straightening her hitai-ite. She was a jonin, by Kami, and she wasn't going to put up with any attitude directed toward herself or her student.

Her red eyes were just a Yuuhi family quirk, but back when she was a genin, Kurenai developed a low-powered genjutsu that gave her eyes a subtle glow. It was more cheap theatrics than anything else, but Mattai thought it was hilarious. It was fairly effective on the less intelligent residents of Konoha – villagers who thought she was 'too pretty' to be a ninja, and shinobi who wouldn't take no for an answer. The seals were easily performed in an unobtrusive fashion and soon she was glowering at anyone who looked twice at her charge. The glow was just barely visible in the waning afternoon light, and it had the desired effect. Kurenai smothered a smile as a particularly obnoxious shopkeeper stumbled over his own merchandise when his glaring eyes moved from Naruto to her. The crash of broken bottles was music to her ears.

Naruto looked back at her and twitched a little when he saw her eyes. She smiled at him and he grinned back. Unlike his previous smiles, this one was shy, with just a hint of mischief. Kurenai wondered if this was the first honest smile of his that she'd seen.

Moritake's was a small café run by a retired shinobi who'd been a friend of Kobaru-sensei. Moritake-san lost most of his lower left leg to an explosive tag trap during the war with the hidden village of stone, and was retired as an active shinobi. He still tended bar and swapped stories with the new graduates, making the place popular with ninja of more than one generation.

Kurenai always dropped by on Kobaru-sensei's birthday and on the anniversary of that awful day when… Anyway, he recognized her the minute she walked in. Naruto rather hesitantly followed her as she strolled up to the bar. He obviously wasn't used to this kind of place.

"Kurenai-chan!" Moritake-san called out with a smile. "And who is the Gaki?"

"This is Uzumaki Naruto," she said in a loud voice, "one of my new students."

She was a little disappointed to see the hesitant expression on Moritake's face, but he quickly mastered it and smiled at the boy. "I know what she wants, but how about some tea, kid?"

Naruto nodded and Kurenai wondered why he was being so quiet. She accepted the warmed bottle of sake with a smile, then placed an order for some yakitori, along with steamed rice and vegetables. Carrying their drinks, Naruto followed her to a table in the corner.

They sat down and Kurenai poured a saucer of the steaming liquid and used it to wash the dust from her throat. She looked over at Naruto, who took a sip of his tea, but seemed pensive. Kurenai looked around. Was he being quiet because he was nervous being in the restaurant?

"Have you ever been in a place like this before?" she asked him in a quiet voice.

Naruto shook his head. "No. I've been to Ichiraku's for ramen, it's really good there, and…" his voice trailed off.

"And they don't run you out like other places do?"

Naruto nodded and growled. "Stupid people…" he muttered.

"I know why they act that way," Kurenai said and Naruto stiffened. "And you're right," she continued, "they are stupid people."

Naruto looked up at her. "Iruka said he wasn't allowed to tell."

"He isn't. I was there actually, when it happened. I was barely a genin, and we were assigned areas well away from the worst of it. No one knows why the demon decided to attack Konoha, and I doubt

we ever will. But the people blaming you for its actions are just trying to strike back at something because they have fear and anger left over from those days. That still doesn't excuse their behavior though. The Hokage's law prohibits me from saying anything to people who don't already know – and you know. The law specifically doesn't apply to you either – you can tell anyone you want to."

"Nani? Why would I want anyone else to know why all the adults hate me?"

"I don't think all the adults hate you. I certainly don't. You had nothing to do with what happened to the village, and you're maintaining the seal that makes sure it doesn't happen again. I think your friends, your true friends, won't care."

"I don't think I have any friends like that, Kurenai-sensei."

"Perhaps, perhaps not. Maybe you will in the future, so don't close off any of your options. Anyway, I wanted to ask you, are you serious about your dream? About wanting to become Hokage?"

"Yes!" Naruto said the word so forcefully that people at neighboring tables glanced over at them.

"Being the Hokage means making decisions for and protecting the entire village and everyone within it," Kurenai informed him. "Including the people that glare at you and treat you like a criminal today. Are you sure you want to devote your life to protecting them as well?"

Naruto took a deep breath. "I'm already doing that, aren't I? The fourth Hokage picked me for some reason to hold back that bastard fox. I spend every day keeping it from destroying Konoha. If he picked me for that duty, I'd like to think he considered me worthy of that responsibility. I just want everyone else to see me that way as well, so his choice would not be in vain."

Kurenai leaned back in her chair and took another long swallow of sake. The hot alcohol blazed a warm trail down her throat and spread out from her stomach. The boy's reasons were not the absolute best, but she knew a lot of kids his age whose ambitions were anchored on far less worthy soil. "All right," she said, "maybe you will make a worthy successor. I'll help you get there."

Naruto stared at her, eyes wide. Maybe she was the first person who hadn't laughed at his ambition. She doubted the Hyuuga girl would, but first she needed to work up the courage to actually speak to him. Something else she needed to work on with the girl.

"First things first," Kurenai continued. "When you have a big goal, the first thing to do is to break it up into smaller goals. You can use those as milestones toward your final objective. Now, what rank is below Hokage?"

"Jonins and special jonins," Naruto replied.

"And before that?"

"Chuunin."

"So good milestones would be achieving chuunin and jonin, correct?"

Naruto nodded.

"Okay, before you can even think about testing for chuunin, we need to make you a solid genin."

Naruto frowned. "I've already made genin," he protested.

"Naruto," Kurenai said firmly, "I'm not going to lie to you. You are sort of a mess right now. You have a lot of potential, but for various reasons, some of them most definitely not your fault, you have yet to achieve that potential. On the other hand, you also seem willing to work hard for your goals, correct?"

Naruto looked hurt, but still nodded.

"Good. A little hard work can make up for a lot." She took another drink of her cooling sake. "With your endurance, you should be able to make up a lot of ground. I wasn't kidding about your role in the team. If things get dicey, they will be depending on you to get them out of danger. The more you improve your taijutsu, the better your clones will fight. The more ninjutsus you know, the better you can utilize that enormous chakra capacity you have. The day will come when Shino and Hinata's lives may depend on you. Mine as well. I'm going to be setting up a lot of extra training for you, if you are willing to do the work. Are you?"

Kurenai found herself blinking rapidly at the expression on Naruto's face. That earlier smile was nothing compared to this one. Naruto's hand shook where it was gripping the table. "K-kurenai-sama, I-"

"Just work hard at your training," she interrupted him, using a purposefully light tone of voice. "And when you're Hokage, assign me a bunch of easy missions and we'll call it even, okay?"

"Hai!" Naruto barked.

Their food arrived at that point and with a shared "Itadakimasu!" they went to work on it. Kurenai was secretly glad of the interruption. Her student was getting a little emotional, and it was becoming contagious. He was just so damn earnest, about everything. Kurenai was an only child, but now she had a pretty good idea of what it would be like to have a younger brother.

After the waitress cleared the plates, Kurenai drank the last of her sake. "We also need to do something about that," she said as she reached across the table and tugged on Naruto's sleeve.

"Nani?"

Kurenai frowned. "Er, you aren't color blind, are you?"

Naruto frowned. "No."

"Then you do realize you are wearing a bright orange jumpsuit, right?"

Naruto nodded. 'What's wrong with it?"

"Naruto, we may need to sneak around at some point. That means bright colors are not a good idea. That's why Shino and Hinata are wearing neutral colors."

"But you're wearing red, and that wrap around thing is black and white," he objected.

"I don't usually wear this in the field, though some kunoichis dress in bright colors so they can masquerade as civilian women. Besides, I mask my appearance with a genjutsu anyway. The brightest color I wore as a genin was such a dark red that it looked like brown from a distance."

"But I like this suit," Naruto whined, looking away and frowning.

Something didn't add up for Kurenai. At first she wondered if he couldn't afford new clothes. But with the stipend he received from the Hokage, and his cheap tastes in food, he shouldn't be hard up for ryou. Then she remembered the looks he received from the shopkeepers on the way there. "Tell you what, meet me at the Hokage tower at nine and I will take you to a place I know."

Naruto looked up and nodded eagerly, confirming her suspicions.

She sat there quietly fuming while they waited for the check. The boy was reluctant to put up with abuse from random shopkeepers, but that left her wondering where he'd found the orange suit. Maybe it had been cast off in a refuse heap, or it had been the only thing they were willing to sell to him. Perhaps some worthless trash of a human being hoped the bright colors would make him more likely to die on a mission.

Kurenai didn't know the owner of the equipment store she frequented, but if they snubbed Naruto in front of her it would be the last thing they did. Experiencing two hours in the life of Uzumaki Naruto left Yuuhi Kurenai ready to commit assault, if not murder.

After she paid the bill, she sent Naruto home with a reminder to meet her in the morning. Then she went straight home to her bed. She planned to get up very early and have some strong words with the Hokage before she took Naruto to get properly outfitted.

A/N:

Hello, and welcome to my little break from the Potterverse. Don't worry, I'm not discontinuing HP&NFP – this is just a mental aperitif… Something to cleanse my brain when The Plot That Will Not Die is causing mental constipation.

The divergence point that makes this AU is Yuuhi Kurenai's decision to take a surreptitious look at the genin candidates after Sarutobi asked her to take on a genin team.

Kurenai's past is such a blank page that it leaves me some room to work with. As you can tell, part of her decision to be so painstaking with her genins is due to a tragedy that befell her own team when she was a genin. More about this will be revealed in the future.

Naruto himself will start becoming more and more OOC as time passes. A lot of his personality seems to have been formed as a reaction to the less-than-benign neglect that has been the basis of his life. I always wondered what he would have been like with a solid mentor who was really looking out for him. (Yeah, Jiraiya did care for the boy later on, but the Toad-Sennin is irresponsibility incarnate.)

As the effects of this one small change start to propagate through the original timeline, expect things to start changing more and more.

So, tell me what you think. Reviews are always welcome and spur me to write faster.

Thanks for reading and welcome to 2006!

-Matthew

# A Painfully Early Morning

Disclaimer – I own nothing, mores the pity.

Team 8

Chapter 2

Kurenai squinted as the morning sun glinted off the white-painted exterior of the Hokage's tower. She had a blinding headache fueled by a lack of sleep and the company she'd been keeping. She'd lain awake longer than she wanted, brooding about her genins. Her original hope was that Naruto would help bring the Hyuuga girl out of her shell. Making the disrespected Hyuuga heir a strong shinobi would be indirect revenge on the head of that arrogant clan, but it was the best she could manage for the time being.

But it seemed that Naruto would need help of his own. Once you got past the bluster and the pranks, he was just as insecure as Hinata. He just hid it better. Shino had less psychological baggage than his teammates, but he also seemed to lack some of their fire. He just didn't seem to put as much effort into things. Perhaps it was that detached persona the Aburames cultivated. The ones she'd met seemed to act as unemotional and precise as the insects they partnered with. Shino was definitely going to be a challenge to understand.

Naruto's deficiencies were the most glaring though, and might take the longest to correct. So she awoke with her alarm before five and sought out Maito Gai at his favorite training ground.

Kurenai had a theory about the more skilled jonins developing severe personality quirks to compensate for the stresses of missions. If she ever wanted to make a presentation on this theory for the Konoha Natural Philosophy Society, Maito Gai would be exhibit A. She supposed he might have been dropped on his head as

a child. Repeatedly. But that didn't explain how he'd survived to become a genin. It was depressing, but far more likely, that he'd started obsessing about green spandex and the power of youth after he became a jonin.

Yuuhi Kurenai dreaded the day she woke up and realized that she'd become just as eccentric in her own way. She'd have no choice at that point but to do the honorable thing and end her own life.

At least Gai was predictable in his obsessions. Every morning they were not out on missions, he and Rock Lee were up before the dawn, working on ridiculously intricate taijutsu combinations. At least he'd focused some of his obsessions in positive ways. His taijutsu was said to be among the best of his generation, and he'd taken on a student with underdeveloped chakra coils and made him an effective shinobi.

She supposed the extra stress of learning how to complete missions without resorting to ninjutsus or genjutsus was considerable. Something had to explain the accelerated descent of Rock Lee into green spandex-clad madness with his sensei.

On the other hand, it was hard to argue with results. The green-clad genin moved so quickly that without chakra, her eyes had difficulty keeping up with him, and his punches were leaving visible divots in the thick training logs. Naruto could learn a lot here.

Gai looked up from his pupil and flashed what he probably thought was a charming grin. "Kurenai-san, you are up early to see the power of youth!"

Kurenai nodded, though she imagined her smile was a little sickly. She was not a morning person by any stretch of the imagination. "I knew I could find you here."

Gai's expression became a trifle smug. "It takes a lot of training to become a genius of hard work! But Lee will make it because he is full of the fires of youth!"

"Yosh! Gai-sensei!"

"Lee!"

"Gai-sensei!"

Kurenai knew she needed to nip this in the bud. Her impending migraine was only a couple of verses away. "I wanted to talk to you about some supplemental training for Tenten, and something else that has come up."

Maito Gai might be self-absorbed, overenthusiastic, and completely lacking in fashion sense, but he wasn't stupid. "Lee! Run five laps around Konoha!"

"Yes, Gai-sensei! And if I cannot do that without stopping, I will climb to the top of the Hokage monument, walking only on my hands!"

Gai cheered as his student took off. Kurenai wondered if Naruto would be safe hanging around with these two. She'd have to make sure later on that day to impress upon her genin that neon green was also not an appropriate color for ninja attire.

Kurenai gathered her thoughts as Gai turned back toward her and crossed his arms in what he seemed to think was a serious pose. "Now that Lee is testing his endurance, what did you wish to discuss?" His smile was a little too eerie for Kurenai's tastes.

"I've been thinking about your idea regarding using our specialized knowledge to best develop our students' potential," she said carefully.

That wasn't exactly what he said when the jonins were all out drinking. What he actually said was something more along the lines of how he'd take pity on any students assigned to his Kakashi, and train them out of sympathy for having such a heartless sensei. Kakashi of course replied by asking if he'd said something.

"Nani?" Gai's inch-thick eyebrows bunched up in confusion.

"Well," Kurenai continued, "I thought it was a pretty good idea, so I'd like to work out a trade. I've got a student who needs a lot of extra work on his taijutsu. If he could join you and Lee in the mornings, he'd provide Lee with a sparring partner as well. In exchange, Tenten can join us when I work with my team on genjutsu training. Lee can come too, if you think he would benefit." Gai's other student, Hyuuga Neji, didn't really need the tutoring. His Byakugan could see through most genjutsus, and Kurenai wasn't crazy about the way she'd seen him glare at his cousin.

Gai ran his thumb over his chin in his 'deep thinking' pose. "Tenten could probably benefit the most, and Lee should at least know what to look for if he falls under a genjutsu. Which student did you want to work with us?"

"Uzumaki Naruto," Kurenai replied, waiting to gauge Gai's response.

To the man's credit, he only nodded thoughtfully. "He is rather small, even if he burns with the fire of youth. Do you think he will be able to train at the pace Lee sets?" The question was innocent, but she saw the man's pride in his disabled/specialized student.

"Naruto's stamina is nearly jonin level. Even when he becomes winded, he's ready to fight again in a couple of minutes. He's also highly motivated to prove himself." She smiled. The hook was baited, now to land the fish. "I wouldn't be surprised if, after getting used to your routine, he didn't start running the two of you ragged."

Maito Gai has never, to her knowledge, ever turned down a challenge of any sort. Ever. "Yosh! We will test the powers of his youth! Kurenai-san, send your student here tomorrow morning and we will make him a genius of hard work, second only to my Lee-kun!"

That was so easy that Kurenai felt a flash of guilt. "Good, and I will have Naruto tell you when we're going over genjutsu and your

students will be welcome to join us."

The rising sun glinting off the man's teeth was beginning to give her a headache, so she made her goodbyes and sought out a cup of strong coffee.

There weren't many shops that sold coffee in Konoha. The Western drink was only just now becoming popular. There were even fewer places serving the caffeinated beverage that were open early in the morning and/or late at night. It was no coincidence that all of them were in close proximity to the Hokage's tower. A lot of all-nighters were conducted there.

Bolstered by two large cups of the strongest brew she could find, Kurenai made her way to the Hokage's office. His chuunin guards had eyes almost as red as hers, confirming her suspicions. The Sandaime was rumored to work incredibly long hours, rising early in the morning and often staying up all night. His only breaks from the pressures of his job were the short walks he took through the village, checking up on this and that. Even those had a purpose, as he often saw what others did not.

With all she knew of the man's dedication to the village and its residents, Kurenai couldn't understand why he let the situation with Naruto go on so long. The things she'd learned over the past week left her both angry and hungry for answers.

But an emotional display would not get her those answers, so she schooled her features into an impassive mask and nodded to the chuunin guards. She still had to remind herself at times that she outranked them now. "I wish to speak with Hokage-sama if he is available."

"Hai!" The one on her right barked. "He has been expecting you, Kurenai-san."

She didn't know if he was bluffing or not. Either way, she was impressed. She nodded to them as they opened the door and

ushered her into the Hokage's office.

Seeing 'The Professor' like this, in the harsh and unforgiving morning sunlight, reminded her that the man was in his late sixties, and should have been happily retired. Instead, he'd been forced back into this office again, and had labored here for another twelve years after the death of the Yondaime. She felt a stab of pity for a man in a thankless job, but squashed it ruthlessly when she remembered someone who deserved better than they'd gotten.

"You're up early, Kurenai," he said in a mild tone.

"Hai, Hokage-sama," she replied in a formal tone, her voice slightly cold. "I have had a conversation that made sleeping… difficult."

He nodded slowly. "And who was this conversation with?"

"Uzumaki Naruto. After getting to know him a little… I find myself questioning my loyalty to Konoha."

Her words were chosen with the intent of provoking a reaction. An admission of semi-treasonous thoughts would normally be met with outrage or derision. She would not expect such a display from the Hokage, but she wasn't prepared for what he did do.

He smiled.

"I'm glad to see that Naruto has found another sympathetic ear," he said as he straightened up in his chair and re-lit his pipe.

"You…" Yuuhi Kurenai was not often struck speechless, but it took a moment for her to collect her thoughts. "You knew what was going on with the boy? Hokage-sama, why have you allowed this?"

The Sandaime sighed and for a moment his eyes showed her a glimpse of a supremely weary soul. "If only the Hokage were as powerful as everyone seems to think." He gave her a tired smile. "It

would be nice to be able to do anything I wanted, at least for a short while."

Kurenai frowned. This wasn't going anything like what she expected. "But you are the Hokage! Your word is law!"

"It is, to a limited extent. In reality, the Hokage just shows the villagers and the shinobi the way. It is up to them to follow his leadership. The two halves of the equation must work together if anything is to be accomplished."

"And in the case of the boy?" She asked. Kurenai had a feeling she knew what he was driving at, but she needed to know for sure.

"You can lead the ox to the river, but it will only drink if it desires to do so. The village elders and the clan heads petition me to have the boy executed, or failing that, to exile him from the village. I refuse to do this. I tell them the boy is the Yondaime's legacy, and that he wished the boy to be seen as a hero, because he is the Kyuubi's jailor. They nod and agree with me, then when they go home they tell their subordinates to shun the boy."

"But… if they are defying your orders… you are the Hokage." The caffeine in Kurenai's blood was keeping her awake, but it also made her thoughts jitter like water-bugs as she struggled with the scope of this betrayal.

"They do nothing to openly defy me," Sarutobi assured her. "They have grown too wary for that. Villagers have tried to kill the boy on numerous occasions, only to be foiled by the ANBU. Worse, there have been shinobi, maddened by their grief, who also sought the boy's life." His eyes hardened. "They met with the same fate. But now? Now they agree with their mouths and disobey with their hearts. The Hokage can tell someone to treat the boy properly, but unless I or one of my subordinates stands over that person, they will not do something they feel has been forced upon them. Konoha has always placed fewer strictures on the private lives of its inhabitants, but it appears there is a downside to this freedom."

Kurenai found herself sitting in one of the chairs facing the Hokage's desk. She wasn't even aware of when she'd sat down. "So you're telling me that the villagers and a good portion of the shinobi… are so determined to abuse Naruto that they will go behind your back to do it? You basically have wide-spread civil disobedience where the boy is concerned?"

Sarutobi nodded. "That is one way to sum it up. The villagers look at the boy and see a reflection of their fears. The shinobi see a reflection of their loss. They won't see him as anything different until he can touch their hearts and make them see the truth. I think one day Naruto will prove himself to the village, and those who scorned him in the past will heartily regret their actions."

"Regrets?" Kurenai asked sharply. "Future regrets mean nothing to him right now. It's a wonder he hasn't run away, or started killing everyone he meets. These idiots will be lucky they don't turn him into a self-fulfilling prophecy with their own actions. Wouldn't it be kinder to send him away? Let him grow up in some isolated village where no one knows who he is?"

"No," the Hokage said in a firm tone. "Naruto is Konoha's. The Yondaime wished him to be the hero of the village, not the exiled pariah." He raised his hand as Kurenai started to speak. "Even if it would be kinder, there are other reasons he must stay. There are rumors of a group that has been seeking out information on the Jinchuuriki. It's not known why they want this, but Naruto is better off in Konoha, and learning to defend himself."

"That's why he was admitted into the Konoha Ninja Academy?"

"He actually wanted to attend…" The Hokage gave a slight smile. "He was quite determined to become a shinobi, as I recall. I just made sure no one stopped him from attending."

"No, but they sabotaged him at every opportunity, didn't they?" Kurenai knew a jonin was supposed to remain calm and logical at all

times… but her frustration with what she was learning put that to the test.

"He still overcame that, didn't he?" that gentle smile was still on the Hokage's face. "And he was awarded his hitai-ite from his sensei, a man who lost his entire family to the Kyuubi." He paused for a moment, looking Kurenai directly in the eyes. "And now he has you."

Suddenly Kurenai felt like she'd just passed a test of some sort. "You were expecting me to come here today, weren't you?"

He nodded. "Perhaps not this early though."

"I had to get up to meet Gai. Naruto's taijutsu needs a lot of extra work. I agreed to work with Tenten on genjutsu, which Gai is hopeless at." She bit her tongue after saying that. Technically, jonins were responsible for training their own genins. There wasn't a specific rule against what she'd done, but it was definitely against custom.

The Hokage chuckled out loud, which shocked her. "Trust Yuuhi Kurenai to break the rules in such a way as to make us ask why we hadn't long ago."

Kurenai shrugged, a little uncomfortable with his humor. "It only made sense. Gai is the best taijutsu instructor I know. His time is better spent doing that than trying to teach genjutsus – something I can do better."

"I see the logic of your plan. Most jonins would not admit that someone else can teach a subject better than they."

"I aim for my genins to be as well prepared as possible before I lead them outside the walls of Konoha. We all know how… the unexpected… can always happen." She didn't mean to sound bitter, but her words still came out that way.

"You still dwell on that day." It was not a question her Hokage was asking.

"There are still no answers for what happened." Her voice was layered with a deep tension, like a steel cable gradually becoming taut.

"You mean there are no answers that you will accept," despite his words, the Hokage's voice was gentle. He seemed to be more sad than anything else.

"Some things stretch the boundaries of coincidence… and we all know who benefited the most from such a tragedy." The cable began to vibrate.

"But there is no proof."

"Is that an indication of innocence? Or cunning? It doesn't matter. I have another team with someone on it who he would rather see in the ground. I'm not going to take any chances this time."

That refusal to take any chances was why she found herself standing outside the Hokage's tower right now, waiting for her student. And feeling her headache get steadily worse.

Fortunately, she did not have long to wait. Shortly before the ninth hour, an orange blur appeared in the distance, bouncing along the rooftops. She watched closely, but there didn't seem to be anyone chasing him, which was a relief. She hoped he'd stop committing pranks all the time… especially if she kept him too busy to get bored.

Naruto landed in a crouch in front of her, grinning like a madman.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "What's the rush?" she asked.

"Ano, you said yesterday that a scouting team needed to do a lot of running away. So I figured it would be good training to travel as quickly as possible."

Kurenai nodded. "And your alarm didn't go off and you barely woke up in time to get here."

Naruto laughed uneasily, and scratched at the back of his head, a little embarrassed.

She chuckled a little as she gestured for him to walk with her. "Well, we'll need to get you a good alarm today as well. Tomorrow you're going to start getting up at five every morning."

"Five o'clock! Why?" Naruto's eyes had gone wide and his mouth dropped open comically.

"Because that's when Gai-sensei does extra taijutsu training with his student, Lee. You will be joining them every day we are in Konoha, is that understood?"

"You aren't going to train me?" He asked, sounding a little confused and disappointed.

"You will still train under me with the rest of the team at our normal meeting times. This is extra training. You'll be working with Maito Gai because he's one of the best taijutsu masters I know. He'll be able to show you things I can't necessarily do."

She took two steps before she realized Naruto had stopped dead in his tracks. "Aren't you my sensei?" he asked, perplexed.

"Yes, I am. Though you should probably call Gai 'sensei' as well. Despite what you may think, it's not a weakness to admit that someone else is better at something than you are. In many ways, it's a strength. Gai is the better person to teach you taijutsu… and I'll be showing his students the finer points of genjutsu. That's why shinobis work best in teams, Naruto. Everyone has different strengths and weaknesses. Knowing how to use the abilities of your team to their best effect is the true test of a leader. Especially a Hokage. Do you understand?"

Naruto stared at her for a moment before he began to nod.

"Good. Then you will be reporting to Gai at training area twenty three every morning at six on days both his team and ours are in Konoha. I'll also give you some advance notice before I start working on genjutsus. His students will probably be joining us for those training sessions. Now… I want you to obey Gai's instructions when you are working with him, but otherwise you are still my student. Before you make any changes that extend outside your training sessions with Gai… I'd like you to check with me first, all right?" She didn't want to undermine Gai's authority, but she was not letting him dress her student up like a clone of himself. One Rock Lee was enough.

Naruto nodded, a little less sure of himself this time.

"Good. Did you bring your money?"

Naruto nodded and dug out a frog-shaped wallet that was stuffed to bursting with folded ryou notes. She blinked, a little impressed that he'd managed to save so much. But she supposed that wasn't so hard to do when few shop owners would have anything to do with him. "Then let's get to it. We have less than three hours before we have to meet the others."

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They stopped for a quick lunch before heading over to training ground nineteen. By that time, Kurenai's headache still hadn't dissipated. The shopping itself didn't help. As she expected, she had to resort to some fairly vile threats to get the shopkeepers to cooperate. Even then she caught two of them deliberately over-charging the boy. The incredibly surprised look on the boy's face when she spoke up in his defense made it even harder for her to control her temper.

"I can refuse service to anyone I choose," a particularly sour old man grated, then spat on the ground in front of them.

"Naruto is a shinobi of the leaf. Is he given a choice about whether or not to defend you if the village is attacked?" she countered.

"You got no business threatening me. What were they thinking, making a silly girl a jonin?"

Kurenai locked gazes with the old man as the temperature inside the weapons shop seemed to drop twenty or thirty degrees. Even Naruto edged backward as the other customers fled. "This silly little girl is acting under the direct orders of the Hokage himself. That means I can do anything to you that I want, since you are acting against his wishes. I can send you on a thirty minute tour of the lowest level of Yomi. When I'm done with you, no one will even recognize you. Assuming, of course, that you're still sane. It would be a lot easier to just drive you mad and then take what we want… wouldn't it, Naruto?"

"Neh, Kurenai-sensei! I don't want anyone to say I am a thief!"

She couldn't tell if Naruto knew she was bluffing or not. This, of course, made the shopkeeper even more terrified. "You are lucky my student cares about his reputation. He's naïve enough to think a foolish old man like you might eventually learn his lesson and see him for who he is. You and I both know that will never happen. After all, you were idiotic enough to insult a jonin to her face, right?" She was laying it on a little thick, but the old baka had decided to play around with the wrong kunoichi this morning.

"Y-yes! I mean, no! I mean…" the old man was babbling in fear now. Even an extremely weak killing intent on her part had nearly broken him.

"Let's go Naruto. As stupid as this old man is, he's probably sharpened the handles of his Kunai instead of the points."

As they made their way to another shop, one run by the father of one of Gai's genins, she spoke quietly to her student. "You notice how fear and ignorance seem to run hand in hand in people? A person

with one, usually has a good portion of the other, and as such is easily affected by genjutsu. He hates you, only because he is afraid, and his fear needs an outlet."

"Why are you telling me this, sensei?"

"Because of this… ignorance and cowardice will never be completely eradicated from the hearts of men. Even if you become Hokage, there will be some people who will still refuse to accept you. There are more than a few people in Konoha who do not accept the Sandaime, either." More than she would have thought before this morning anyway.

Naruto nodded slowly. His eyes may have dimmed a little, and she felt ashamed of herself for tarnishing his dreams, even if it would save him from future disappointment.

"That said," she continued, "what I did just now is not something to be done lightly. There was an element of bullying to how I treated that old man, and that is not something a shinobi should be doing."

"Then why did you do it?" he said, asking the obvious question.

"One, I wanted to demonstrate something for you. Two, he was acting directly against the will of the Hokage, which is criminal at best and treasonous at worst. Three, he insulted my gender."

"Gender?" Naruto asked. The boy was full of questions, but in some ways that made him easier to teach.

"Some people think that men are inherently superior to women."

Naruto just looked at her, obviously puzzled.

"Look, which of your teammates would you rather face in a serious fight?"

"Oh. Hinata, of course."

"What do you mean, 'of course'?" Kurenai asked in a deceptively mild tone.

"Well, Shino's bigger, and he hits harder."

"But wouldn't Hinata's Jyuuken hurt more?"

"Maybe, but I don't think she'd use it on a teammate."

Kurenai sighed. "All right then, outside our team. Say… would you rather face Sasuke or Sakura."

The boy visibly shuddered. "S-sasuke."

Kurenai stopped dead in her tracks. Naruto would rather face the Uchiha genius? Maybe he was still afraid of offending his crush… "Why is that?" she asked him.

"Sakura hits really, really hard when she's mad," Naruto whispered.

*Okay, he is being objective after all,* Kurenai mused, *maybe there's hope for him after all. Asuma didn't do nearly as well.*

On the way to the other weapon shop, she passed a tailor that had a banner on the front proclaiming their grand opening. She changed their itinerary on the spot, and was glad she did. The proprietor, a man named Ikitaro, had recently emigrated from Wave Country, hoping to make a new start after the economic depression there ruined his old business. As she hoped, the man knew nothing about Naruto's past, and was overjoyed that one of his first new customers would be a Konoha shinobi.

Ikitaro had some ideas that Kurenai liked, though she had a few suggestions, based on what she knew about Gai's training methods.

"Weights? Really? How heavily should those seams be reinforced then?" the young man asked.

Kurenai gave Naruto a speculative look. "I'd use the heaviest material you have, backed with thick leather for the seams and the inserts. His instructor tends to increase the load as they get used to it."

Naruto didn't sound too enthused at what she was suggesting… right up until she mentioned that it would make him faster and stronger than Sasuke. At that point he would have cheerfully agreed to being lit on fire.

Ikitaro didn't have any other customers yet, and he worked incredibly fast, altering some heavy clothes that were already close to the right size. When they were done, Naruto didn't have a scrap of orange left. He wore heavy trousers made of a dark green material, with a matching jacket. Both pieces were reversible, the lining being a neutral grey. The idea being that when he was traveling somewhere with little or no vegetation, the grey color would be less conspicuous. The knees and elbows were reinforced with quilted padding. Ikitaro also included, at her suggestion, a dark grey cloth that Naruto could wrap around his head and tuck under his hitai-ite to conceal his bright blond hair.

Under the jacket he wore a black t-shirt, and a shuriken holster was strapped to each thigh. A weapons pouch was attached to his belt on each hip as well. Kurenai noted that Naruto didn't really seem to favor either hand when he fought; some tasks he seemed to do right-handed and other things he did left-handed. He was more than likely ambidextrous, a rare and useful trait, especially for a shinobi. *Not that anyone would bother to notice* , she reflected bitterly, *best not to make a big fuss about it. That would only drive home that no one paid attention before.* They also purchased a large traveling backpack for him. Since Gai would almost certainly have him working with weights on his body like Lee, she decided that some of that extra weight might as well take the form of extra weapons and equipment. One day he might be called upon to carry a wounded teammate, just like she was… Kurenai ruthlessly severed that train of thought.

Naruto was oddly quiet as he looked at himself in the mirror. It was hard for her to tell at that angle, but he seemed to be frowning slightly. She stood directly behind him so he could see her face in the mirror as she nodded approvingly. "You look like a serious shinobi now."

He nodded, but still looked a little sad as he paid Ikitaro and stuffed his old jumpsuit into the backpack. The shopkeeper looked a little unsure about the change in his once-exuberant customer, but he still bowed and invited them back if Naruto needed any repairs or alterations.

"Is something the matter, Naruto?"

He shook his head. "I just feel… funny. When I look at myself in these clothes I get a weird feeling in my stomach, and I know it's not expired milk."

Kurenai was fairly sure she didn't want to know more about his last remark. "Maybe it's started sinking in, Naruto. You've graduated from the academy and become a genin. Soon, you will be doing missions, and some of them will be dangerous. Maybe the new clothes represent that seriousness?"

Naruto nodded slowly. "Is it okay to feel scared about that?"

"It would be stupid not to. Every shinobi who goes on a mission does so knowing that something might end their life. But life is all about risk, isn't it? So we work, and we train, and we do everything we can to be prepared for what comes. I'll do what I can to keep you three alive and safe, and you'll help me keep Shino and Hinata safe as well."

"What about them, sensei?"

"They will help me keep each other safe, and you as well."

"Then who keeps you safe?"

Kurenai smiled. "That's my job. There's a reason they send a jonin with each genin team, and it isn't just to make you behave."

Naruto scowled at this but didn't say anything.

As Kurenai hoped, the next weapon shop they visited had a more congenial proprietor. Once she mentioned that Naruto would be training under his daughter's sensei he was even friendlier.

"Tenten isn't here right now," he explained as he looked at Naruto speculatively. "Do you have a special weapon preference?" he asked.

Naruto shook his head. "Just kunais and shuriken."

The man nodded thoughtfully. "Probably better to get more of your full growth before your commit to something."

"Really?" Naruto looked at him in confusion.

The man nodded. "Unless you plan to train on a wide variety of weapons," he said, his proud smile unmistakable as he thought of his daughter, "it's best to see what size you are likely to end up at. Some weapons work better for relatively larger people, others work better for shinobi that are usually smaller than their opponents. Even a cut down tetsubo is less effective if you are smaller than everyone you fight. Similarly, trying to snare a much smaller and faster opponent with a manriki-gusari can be an exercise in frustration. Most shinobi your age just stick with kunai until they encounter something that really appeals to them."

Naruto nodded thoughtfully. Then he frowned. "What are a tetsubo and a manniki-gitari?"

The man made a face, and then laughed. "A tetsubo is an iron-shod club, made out of heavy oak and around six feet long. It's a very heavy weapon, but hits very hard. It requires good balance and lot of strength to use well. The manriki-gusari is a chain with a weighted

handle on each end. It's tricky to use, but very handy for entangling opponents."

Kurenai spoke up before Naruto wore out his welcome. "He'll need two full sets of kunai and shuriken." The ones he'd used at the academy were dull and covered with nicks and gouges, evidently having been forged from inferior steel. He'd no doubt also paid a premium for them, given the way he was frowning at the prices on display.

"Do you carry exploding tags?" she asked before Naruto could ask why his prices were so low. She didn't want him seeking vengeance on the shopkeepers on his own. Her idea worked better than she thought as Naruto's head jerked up. She remembered Mattai talking about how 'men' always liked things that exploded and had to force herself to swallow.

"I just received a new case from the Sumijin. I, uh, tested one out back, just to be sure. It lit up precisely three seconds after my chakra triggered it, and produced a nice-sized fireball. Easily ten feet across."

Naruto's eyes lit up eagerly, and Kurenai had to restrain him from spending the rest of his money on the explosive ofuda. The magic word, of course, was 'Ramen', and a suggestion that he might want to save some money if the team were to get together after practice for an early dinner.

The mention of food also produced a low growl from the boy's stomach that was audible to everyone nearby. Naruto looked embarrassed, but the shopkeeper just laughed and recommended a nearby restaurant. "I remember what it was like when I was his age. I never thought I would stop being hungry!" Naruto chuckled at that and Kurenai decided she'd be sending the man all of her business in the future. The old goat with the shop near the Hokage's tower deserved to go out of business and starve.

Hinata's morning seemed to crawl by… much like the inchworm she watched as she sat in the garden. She'd slept poorly that night, too excited to relax. She couldn't believe her fortune at being placed on a team with Naruto-kun. The rest of the day had passed in a bit of a haze.

She knew she hadn't been properly focused during the taijutsu sparring. Shino managed to hold her off with no difficulty. Naruto too, was just as fast as she was, if a little less… precise in his movements. Ordinarily, she might have been a little worried about sparring with the boy she admired, wondering if he would grow impatient with her weakness. Instead, he seemed to enjoy it quite a bit, smiling as they exchanged blows, and sticking his lower lip out when she managed to connect. She tried not to pay attention when he did that, because she found his fake sulks adorable and squealing 'kwaii!' in the middle of taijutsu practice was not something a Hyuuga warrior was supposed to do.

The way Naruto enjoyed sparring, she wondered why he never joined in with the other kids after school when they gathered, sometimes with the parents supervising, for extra practice… and to show off a bit. She, of course, was not allowed to do such things, as her father would not approve. The secrets of Jyuuken, her family's 'Gentle Fist' taijutsu style, were not meant to be paraded around in front of 'commoners'. Hinata sometimes wondered who in the village, outside her family, were not considered commoners, but she hadn't built up the nerve to ask her father.

At least her duties as a shinobi were clear cut. If Kurenai-sensei wanted her to spar with her teammates, then she was right to do so. Father could not disapprove of her following a direct order… though sometimes she wondered.

Hinata had learned, at a young age, to be wary of the emotional states of others, and to read them as a means of self-defense. Her father was best avoided when he was angry or frustrated. Otherwise, the sight of her might remind him of her history of failures and he might decide to test her in some new way. She knew he was only

trying to find some aspect of her life in which she wasn't a complete disappointment to him, but lately she was starting to wish he would just give up on her. It hurt too much to be given hope that she might somehow win his approval this time, only to have it brutally crushed out of her heart when she invariably failed again.

She knew her life was one long legacy of failures, but hopefully, if she trained hard, she might find some way to make a difference. Perhaps she could die bravely in a mission, like the heroine in a book she'd once read. That way at least her failures would be over and maybe in some way her death would mean something. Maybe if she did that well enough, her father might not regard her as a waste of a life.

She frowned as she recognized the downward spiral her thoughts had taken. This was happening more and more frequently of late, and she found it a little disturbing. Yet another thing that was going wrong with her. The other kunoichis didn't think like this, did they? What was wrong with her?

She pressed her fingers together as she scowled. What was she thinking about before being distracted by failures? Yes. Father could not disapprove of her following Kurenai-sensei's orders. They were drilled constantly on the laws of the shinobi at the Konoha Ninja Academy, and obedience to one's superior was paramount. This was so ingrained in the way of the shinobi that if her commander ordered her to do something that violated the laws of the village, then her commander would be responsible in the eyes of the law.

But she'd also sensed something between her father and Kurenai-sensei when she was sent to the academy. Something that she was almost too distracted by her mortification to notice. There was a tension there, one that was unexpected. Kurenai-sensei never took her eyes off of Otousan, and her father seemed to react toward her with greater disdain than he normally displayed toward a chuunin who was not a Hyuuga. Pondering that dynamic was less painful at the time than thinking about her father's words as he cast her away like refuse.

It was also diverting to think of his latest reactions to her news. Two nights ago, he'd stared at her when she announced that she had passed the genin examination. Then he asked her what her ranking in the class had been. She had been so happy to have passed that she didn't think to ask about the class rankings afterward. He scowled when she tried to explain this, saying in a cold voice that for a Hyuuga to pass as anything but the top of the class was a failure in and of itself. He'd seen the crop of rabble that they were admitting these days, and he was far from impressed. It should be simplicity itself for the Hyuuga heir to distinguish herself from the common dregs, if she would but try.

Hinata was embarrassed and ashamed that she hadn't anticipated her father's request. She had forgotten her family's place at the forefront of the village. Of course, merely passing would not be enough to earn his approval. After lunch yesterday, she'd asked Iruka-sensei in the hallway if she could know her ranking within the class. He'd looked at her for a long moment, then explained that such information was considered classified by the village. She started to explain why she wanted to know when Iruka suggested, in a kindly voice, that Hiashi-sama was more than welcome to meet with himself or any other academy instructor if he desired the details on her performance. At this, Hinata merely turned red and bowed, babbling apologies. She knew father would not waste time to come here in person to hear of her failures.

But his reaction the previous night was even stranger. He asked if she'd been assigned to a jonin for missions, or given some other duty. When she said she would be on a team under Yuuhi Kurenai, he went very still. She saw something dark flash behind his blank eyes and felt a sudden surge of terror. She'd never seen her father fight before. She'd been wrapped up in blankets when her father killed the kidnapper from Kumo. But now she'd seen a flash of his killer intent, and found it to be every bit as terrifying as she'd imagined.

As quickly as it appeared, it was gone. Then he asked who her teammates were. He didn't react to Aburame Shino, but when she mentioned Uzumaki Naruto… The dark fire behind his blank white eyes returned, but it was even stronger this time. His killing intent made what she felt earlier seem to be a mild flash of irritation. She asked if there was a problem, in a quavering voice that she hated herself for. He responded by ordering her to bathe and retire for the night. She wasn't that hungry for supper, but she was puzzled by his insistence that she cleanse herself. She ordinarily took a shower every morning, and she hadn't really worked up that much of a sweat during the day.

Now she wasn't to meet her new team until noon, so she woke up as early as she could and made her way to the garden after dressing. The garden had been her mother's pride and joy, according to the older servants, and it was seldom frequented in the mornings. As such, it had become a haven for her. Here she could sit and think. Here she could try and tease apart the nightmarish tangle of disappointments and failure her life had become.

She looked up at the sun, calculating that it was nearly eleven now. She rose from her mother's bench and slipped out of the Hyuuga compound.

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Aburame Shino was not quite sure what to make of his team.

It was logical that he might be assigned to a reconnaissance team. His abilities were quite suitable for such a role. Shino was a great believer in logic.

He was also painfully aware that his belief in rationality placed him firmly in the minority among both his fellow shinobi and the residents of Konoha in general. He didn't really understand why he was surrounded by people who insisted on handling their affairs in such incredibly slipshod manners. They based the most important decisions of their lives on emotional, poorly thought out, and

invariably fallacious reasoning. They mated, raised families, and began careers, all with no thought of the eventual outcomes.

Hives were much more intelligently run. Their goals were rather Spartan, but all the more straightforward because of that. Raise the young to continue the colony, locate and retrieve food to sustain the members, protect the queen so she can continue laying eggs. Simple, but logical. An insect hive's system of priorities was never skewed. Ego and emotions never coerced them into doing stupid things. He admired their focus and dedication to their goals.

For all of his own rationality and desire to maintain an objective focus, how did he end up in this situation? He was teamed up with two of the most emotional and erratic genins in his class. Uzumaki Naruto's abilities followed no sane progression. He failed his exam because he was singularly incapable of creating an acceptable bunshin. But yesterday, he was somehow a genin anyway, and furthermore capable of using the far more demanding Kage Bunshin technique.

There was something quite odd about the boy, something that ran far deeper than just being class clown at the academy. His kikai bugs were unusually wary of being too close to his body. Something about him smelled odd to them, but they couldn't really explain what it was. That alone would be cause for concern. Things that couldn't be easily categorized were invariably dangerous. The idea of the smiling, ramen-obsessed blond being dangerous was ludicrous, but the principle still held. He had a secret, and for a shinobi, secrets can kill.

On the other hand, Hyuuga Hinata was all too easy to comprehend. She had an obvious fixation on their teammate, Naruto. To give her credit, she seemed intelligent on other subjects, and seemingly every female her age was obsessed with at least one member of the male gender. Although Naruto was harder to comprehend in such a role than the Uchiha heir, it was just as irritating to have to deal with.

When he pointed out the obvious gaps in their array of skills, the kunoichi expressed an unswerving faith that the object of her affections would not let them down. She believed he would somehow magically acquire the skills that had eluded him throughout their years at the academy. While hard work could, in fact, make up for some deficits in ability, her avowal that Naruto would never let them down was nothing short of ridiculous.

The sheer irrationality of the situation left him looking somewhat askance at their jonin instructor. Yuuhi Kurenai was only recently promoted to the jonin rank, and this was to be her first team of genins. He found it hard to believe, however, that a genjutsu specialist with her reputation for intelligence would just pick her team out at random. There had to be some deeper reason for the three of them being thrown together like this. He was just damned if he could see it.

It wasn't like he had any choice, and that realization brought a frown to his face. One small enough, however, to remain hidden behind his sunglasses and jacket collar, which was good. One had to maintain appearances, after all. No matter how irritating the situation.

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Naruto felt a bit odd in his new clothes. They were comfortable, of course, Ikitaro was extremely skillful. It was puzzling how he managed to lose his business in the Wave Country. Whatever that 'economic depression' thing was, it sounded pretty bad.

There was more than one reason for his uneasiness, despite what he'd told Kurenai. The other factor just took him longer to puzzle out. When people saw him, they didn't immediately recognize him anymore. In some ways this was disappointing. He wanted people to recognize him, Uzumaki Naruto, the village pariah. At the same time, it was… interesting to have them look at him with the neutral, vaguely respectful expressions they reserved for shinobi of the leaf that they didn't recognize. At least Ikitaro and that last weapon smith seemed to respect him as Naruto, even though Ikitaro had no way of knowing about his sealed prisoner.

Naruto kept his face carefully neutral as he walked with Kurenai-sensei and tried to work out how he felt about this. Some villagers eventually recognized his face as they approached. At this point many would glare as they did in the past. However, a few continued looking confused. Were they wondering what the clothes signified? Or were they starting to question their opinion of the shinobi wearing those clothes? Naruto struggled to maintain the sober expression that Kurenai-sensei called a 'game face' for some obscure reason. He wondered if he should ask her about the villagers' changing reactions as well.

It was a little unnerving, how wise his jonin instructor was. He'd never encountered someone who spent so much time thinking about the reasons behind things. At least, he'd never encountered someone who thought so much about those things – and was willing to share that information with him as well. He'd probably spent more time thinking and less time talking in the last twenty-four hours than in any day of his life. He didn't understand why she spent so much time explaining things.

She said that it was important for him to understand, so that made it part of her job. But that would apply to the academy instructors as well, wouldn't it? Until his last year, when he was assigned to Iruka-sensei's class, he'd never had an instructor who would simply answer any of his questions. Some were sarcastic or abusive when he raised his hand, wanting to know why he couldn't understand something so simple. This would usually get a laugh from his classmates at Naruto's expense. The really cold ones just ignored him when he raised his hand, looking through him like he wasn't there. Those were the worst, and fueled his determination to become a prankster. If they wanted to ignore him, then they would pay the price.

Naruto took a deep breath as they approached training area nineteen. Kurenai-sensei had explained as they ate lunch that he would be far too busy to do many pranks. Naruto wasn't quite sure how he felt about that. He'd had some fun over the past couple of

years, and enjoyed the grudging respect he'd earned from the few people who could appreciate his artistry. He would miss planning and executing one of his stunts, not to mention the wild chases that inevitably followed. On the other hand, his pranks were usually committed out of boredom, which was anathema to him… and Kurenai-sensei promised that he would have no time to become bored.

It was also oddly rankling how she said that she didn't want him causing trouble now that he was on her team. He'd lived on his own for years now, with no one bossing him around. Now his jonin instructor was laying down the law and restricting what he could do, even during his free time. However… he wasn't just upset about this. She also said that his misbehavior could reflect poorly on his team as well as herself. When she said that "I don't want to have to explain to Hokage-sama why one of my genins still has enough free time to deface the monument," he felt his stomach contract like he'd been hit. Her genins. His team. He'd never really had anyone claim him like that before. It was an alarming and comforting sensation, all at the same time.

No one had ever described Naruto as 'theirs' before, not in any way that counted. His acceptance at the Konoha Ninja Academy was grudging at best, and he suspected that Hokage-sama had something to do with it. After all, the old man was the first person to even ask him if he wanted to train as a shinobi.

But Kurenai-sensei freely described him as 'her student', even when talking to villagers that obviously hated him. Hinata didn't seem to be disappointed about teaming with the 'dead last'. Neither did Shino, though it was hard to tell with those dark glasses he wore over his expressionless face.

Kurenai also said she was depending on him… depending on him to help keep his teammates safe. No one had ever said anything like that to him before. The responsibility it implied was a little frightening. But at the same time, he wanted to shout about it from the roof-tops. The latter feeling surprised him.

Uzumaki Naruto was not known for his introspective capabilities. He'd gotten through twelve difficult years operating by the seat of his pants, but Kurenai-sensei had demonstrated at Moritake's just how powerful her intuition was when it was bolstered by some hard thinking. It was with this in mind that he tried to tease apart his own feelings. It took a surprisingly short amount of time for him to arrive at an answer.

He'd been acknowledged.

In the space of twenty four hours, Naruto had been acknowledged by no less than four people. First Iruka, who he'd gotten to know over his last year at the academy. Even after suffering the loss of his family to the Kyuubi, he still saw Naruto as a lonely boy, much like himself, rather than the demon kitsune.

More surprising was the jonin who'd asked for him to be included on her team, valuing his skill with Kage Bunshin no Jutsu. She didn't know him, but she still saw value in him as a person and a shinobi. He wasn't foolish enough to believe that the errands they'd run that morning were a normal part of a jonin instructor's responsibilities.

His teammates had also accepted him to some extent as well. They didn't sneer yesterday when he was beaten during their impromptu sparring matches. In fact, he even noticed Hinata smiling when he bounced off the tree and actually got inside Shino's guard for once. Shino didn't get angry when Naruto actually scored on him. He just nodded silently and went back into a ready position.

As far as Naruto could remember, neither of them had laughed or sneered at him while they were at the academy, which already put them in the clear minority.

Naruto's thoughts stumbled over each other as he pondered this realization. He remembered what his sensei had said about Team 10. Most of the leaf shinobi also knew their famous fathers, the previous Nara-Akimichi-Yamanaka team, and how they were still friends (and drinking buddies) to this day. Naruto wondered if they

conspired to have their children at roughly the same time, just to ensure they'd have the chance to work together as genin like their fathers. Would his team become as close? Was that normal for genins who undertook missions together?

For Naruto, who'd never really had any friends his own age, that idea struck him like a thunderbolt, almost making him stumble and fall. Would Shino and Hinata become his friends, as well as teammates? Given what he knew, it seemed almost inevitable, didn't it?

Then Naruto was struck by a sudden chill. Well, perhaps not inevitable. There was another possible fate that awaited every genin team. Despite the presence of jonin instructors and the limitations on what missions they could take, there was always the possible fate that awaited any shinobi on a mission. Bad luck and treachery could circumvent any safeguards, and jonins were not infallible. Sometimes genins did not come back from their missions. Naruto also heard that many died during the difficult tests for chuunin rank. Sometimes they made it back, but with injuries that forced them to seek a different vocation. Any way you sliced it, being a professional shinobi was not a safe profession.

Oddly enough, given how short a time he'd had them, the thought of losing his teammates sent a chill right through Naruto's heart. He knew that at this point he was dreading the loss of a potential friend more than the real thing, but it stung nonetheless. He knew Kurenai-sensei would do everything in her power to prevent that, but again, she was still only human.

Then he remembered what she'd said earlier. "…and you'll help me keep Shino and Hinata safe as well," were her words. Naruto's jaw tightened and he felt unaccountably angry, almost… fierce. He found himself gritting his teeth and curling his hands into fists as they approached the training area.

For someone who'd been alone all his life, Kurenai-sensei, Shino, and Hinata had joined Iruka-sensei as representatives of something

that was more precious than gold. Anyone trying to hurt his precious people would do so only after stepping over his dead body.

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Yuuhi Kurenai couldn't completely suppress a grim smile as she felt the killing intent literally exploding from within her student. It had been fascinating to subtly observe the play of emotions across his face as they walked to the training area to meet with the others. She'd have to teach him how to hide his emotions better when he was brooding, because the direction of his thoughts had been almost embarrassingly obvious to her. Asuma and the Nara boy would clean out his pockets if they could lure him into a game or three.

But now he seemed to have connected the dots that she'd presented him with, and his obvious determination confirmed that she'd picked wisely. She didn't know if having a potential heavy combat specialist on their team would have saved Mattai and the others, but it couldn't hurt. Especially given how motivated Naruto seemed to be.

He was oblivious to the reactions of the others, hands fisted at his sides and glaring down at the street. But the villagers definitely noticed the murderous aura radiating from the boy like a bonfire. Many of them turned away from him before his presence even registered. The ones that hadn't yet recognized Naruto were quietly respectful; the ones that recognized the Kyuubi's jailor looked terrified. *As well they might,* Kurenai reflected angrily, *given the way he's been treated.*

Nonetheless, she carefully placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. His head snapped around, glaring, but his features immediately softened when he saw her. He nodded without saying a word and smiled.

She knew the boy was strong willed. He'd have to be to have endured the treatment of the villagers without breaking down or lashing out. But until now, she'd never had an objective demonstration of it. It took considerable force of will to generate a psychic atmosphere capable of intimidating without words. Especially without eye contact. But the short blond had gone from

smiling prankster to enraged killer in the blink of an eye, to an extent that even Ibiki-san would have taken note of.

More and more the boy seemed to be a diamond in the rough, just waiting for a hand patient enough to polish it to gleaming perfection. Maybe her analogy was a little off… her true task was more to sharpen him into a diamond-edged weapon, one capable of helping her reach a goal she'd set years ago.

A/N:

Wow, I was really bowled over by the response to my first chapter of this tale.

About a third as many people read this as read a chapter of HP&NFP (based on the hit counts), but that single chapter got more reviews than any chapter of my Harry Potter story to date. I'm not sure what that implies, but it's kind of interesting to note…

Yes, Kurenai's past in this story is not canon – it's pretty much been left as an open book. If it bothers you that I'm filling this in, then you can consider the annihilation of her old genin team as the AU divergence point, one that resulted in her actions in chapter one. No, I haven't revealed everything about that occurrence that I'm going to. Savor the mystery for now.

Naruto has been given a lot to think about, which is making him a lot quieter than usual. Sakura's words expressing her relief at not being saddled with him on team 7 literally broke his heart. A few hours later, Kurenai treated him like almost no adult in his life ever has before. This led to an epiphany that Naruto, with his loneliness, was almost inevitably going to have once he was placed on a team.

I found a continuity error in chapter 1 and fixed it. It was fairly minor, but it wanted to correct it before moving forward.

I currently have the anime, and I'll be basing my canon content off of that and wikipedia (which is a surprisingly good reference). The filler

arcs were occasionally silly, but they do fill in some background and give us more to work with.

Speaking of which, there are some interesting threads about Team 8 and Naruto on the yahoo group. Feel free to join in, as I cannot go into too much detail about things in the author notes without risking a ban.

Thanks for reading!

-Matthew

# First Mission

Disclaimer – I own nothing, mores the pity.

Team 8

Chapter 3

Hinata was the first to arrive at training area nineteen. She'd left home earlier than strictly necessary, but she was happy to be out of the Hyuuga compound. It was, she supposed, somewhat shameful that she felt happier away from her ancestral home. She knew that her father would see that as a demeaning lack of pride in her heritage. Hinata sometimes wondered what her mother would think, if she were still alive.

Shino arrived a few minutes later. The Aburame boy was quiet, merely nodding to her when she greeted him. At first Hinata wondered if he was angry with her for disagreeing with him at lunch yesterday. But as she watched him examine the base of one of the trees, she remembered how quiet he had been at the academy. Perhaps he just didn't have anything to say.

Kurenai arrived with another boy, and it took a moment for Hinata to recognize Naruto without the orange jumpsuit that had been his trademark over the last couple of years. He was frowning; making Hinata wondered what was wrong. Naruto was always smiling and joking, and for him to appear so grim…

As they approached, Kurenai-sensei put her hand on his shoulder and said something too quiet to hear. Naruto nodded and shook himself, like a dog with wet fur, and then he straightened up and let out a sigh. Naruto grinned at everyone and she felt her face begin to flush again.

"I'm glad to see you all got here early," Kurenai called out as they walked up. "Punctuality is important for what we do… or rather, being too late can be fatal."

Hinata felt her stomach tighten at the jonin's grim words, but tried not to let her fear show. Father would be mortified that any Hyuuga, let alone his own daughter, would show fear before others. Not that Hinata had done that well at abiding by her father's wishes.

Shino didn't visibly react to their sensei's words. Instead, he just continued to look at her through his ever-present dark glasses. Hinata envied his reserve.

Hinata did not know quite what to make of Naruto's new uniform. He looked rather good in it, she had to admit. It was also certainly more practical, but his orange jumpsuit had become such a part of him that it seemed strange to see him without it. The quiet way he approached with Kurenai-sensei was also at odds with his normal behavior. All of this made Hinata concerned for her teammate. She liked the Naruto that always smiled and tried again, and she didn't want to see that change.

As she became more upset, a sudden thought gave her pause. She liked the loud, brassy Naruto, but did he necessarily like it himself? He'd looked so dejected after the Genin exam, and her mind wandered back to other times that he'd been down. Were those truly the only times he'd been upset – or were they the only times he let it show?

Reading people was a high art among the Hyuugas, ever since one of her clan leader ancestors took his Byakugan to a new level. Hinaro-san was the first to actively read a person's intentions from the tension in their bodies and the way they moved. The observations he made were said to be devastatingly accurate, and the Fire Lord often hired him to evaluate his courtiers and to aid his spymaster in weeding out the disloyal. His eyes were said to be acute enough to detect variations in a shinobi's pulse rate by observing the vibrations in the skin over their carotid arteries. There

is even a rumor that fear of this formidable skill was what led the Hatake family to begin wearing their traditional masks.

As with most of her family's arts, Hinata was not very adept with body reading. She could see the disappointment and resentment that festered in the eyes of the clan elders, but they also didn't bother to conceal their feelings. Her cousin Neji, on the other hand, was said to be able to see things that the adults wished to keep unnoticed. From most people, Hinata could merely guess at their mental state.

However, she had also spent a long time studying Naruto. She was no expert on his mercurial moods, but as she watched him approach, she didn't get a sense of sadness or anger from him. He was just… reserved, in an odd way.

At the same time, he also seemed very focused. When Kurenai-sensei spoke, Naruto took in every word. Not even Iruka-sensei at his angriest could command so much of Naruto's attention. Hinata found herself respecting the jonin even more now, though she wondered what she had said or done to Naruto to earn such respect.

Her curiosity became even stronger when the woman reached into the pouch at her waist and removed a pair of scrolls. She handed one to Shino and the other to Hinata. "These are some exercises I'd like you to perform on your own, outside of our team meetings. They are mostly speed and endurance-building exercises, though there are also activities that should build up your chakra capacity and control."

Hinata carefully placed the scroll in her weapons pouch. "Ano, sensei, uh… what will we be doing during team meetings?" Despite Kurenai-sensei's kindly demeanor, Hinata still found it embarrassingly difficult to speak out or ask questions.

"That's a good question, Hinata," Kurenai replied evenly. "I'd like this time to be spent working on things that would benefit from us all being together. For the speed and endurance training, I will leave it

to each of you to make sure you are pushing yourselves as hard as you can. Remember, it won't just be you paying the penalty if you don't. But a team also needs to learn how to fight together. Sparring will let you test and improve your skills against one another, and it will also let you come to understand each others' fighting styles. From what I saw yesterday, they are quite different."

Kurenai smiled, perhaps a little grimly. "That knowledge will prove very useful when you fight together as a team. You will know how your teammates will react and be able to move with them smoothly to counter any threats. A well-trained shinobi team can move together like a well-oiled machine, and becomes much more effective than just the sum of its members. We call this extra bonus 'synergy'."

Hinata nodded slowly. She vaguely remembered something about that concept from lessons at the academy last year. Naruto frowned thoughtfully but didn't say anything.

With that, Kurenai put them to work. "We'll start with just taijutsu today. No other techniques for right now. Just hand to hand. Hinata, why don't you and Naruto start? Light contact only."

Hinata was a little nervous about sparring with Naruto first thing, but tried to control her reactions. Sensei was right, she needed to know her teammates as well as she knew herself.

Naruto moved a little stiffly at first, perhaps because of his new clothes. Hinata activated her Byakugan so she could see his Tenketsu points, but she didn't push any chakra out of her palms as she struck. This way she could tell if she struck true, which wasn't as often as she liked, but didn't disable her teammate.

Naruto jolted back on his heels when her palm slipped around his block and struck him flat on the chest. He smiled ruefully at her and shook his head. Her stomach gave an odd wobble as he dropped back into a ready stance. Naruto didn't seem to be upset that she'd scored on him. In fact, his look was almost… approving.

That thought made her falter and she almost missed a block. Naruto, of course, was pulling his punches at the last instant; neither of them was out to hurt the other. Nonetheless, his knuckles still jarred her shoulder.

Mortified at her slip, Hinata grabbed his sleeve, wrapping her fingers around his arm just above the wrist. She brought her other hand in low, aiming for the Tenketsu point right above the hara, between the navel and diaphragm.

Naruto twisted backwards to avoid the blow, but her hold on his arm limited his motion. Naruto purposefully fell backwards. Hinata let go of his arm so she could chamber a kick, but then realized that he had a handful of her jacket clenched in his fist now.

Her unpredictable teammate rolled onto his back, pulling his knees up to his chest, and Hinata was yanked forward off her feet. He let go of her shoulder as her stomach came to rest on his sandals. Hinata barely saw the pleased grin on his face before she was launched into the air.

Hinata found herself upside down, flying backwards through the air. She curled up to speed her rotation, and managed to get her feet under her before she landed, her back to Naruto.

"Good recoveries, both of you," Kurenai said, and with the Byakugan still active, Hinata could see her smiling without having to turn her head. She was embarrassed at her slip, and could see her father's disapproving glare in her mind, but no one here seemed to notice or care.

Nonetheless, Naruto seemed a bit more focused when they resumed their match. His attacks sped up and became more fluid, and Hinata had to fully focus her concentration to block him. Every time she blocked one of his punches or kicks, his grin became a little wider, and Hinata found herself smiling a little as well. *He really should have participated in the after class sparring* , she mused as she ducked under a looping roundhouse kick. She swept his supporting

leg, but Naruto twisted sideways with the motion and landed in a hand stand. His waist twisted and the foot she'd swept came arcing towards her face. She leaned back to avoid it, and as it passed she struck the back of his calf with the heel of her hand.

This sent Naruto's lower body off-balance to the left. He should have fallen to the ground, but he'd anticipated this and flexed his elbows, throwing his upper body into the air even as his legs rotated to the ground. He ended up on his feet in a comically wide stance, but the rotation brought his upper half in close to Hinata and his left hand came up inside her guard. She tried to flinch back from the fist rising toward her jaw, but it was too late. She closed her eyes and felt her head jolt.

Instead of the expected pain of impact, her chin felt very warm. She opened her eyes, realizing that she'd dropped her Byakugan in her surprise. Naruto's hand was wrapped around the point of her chin, his fingers warm on her cheeks.

"Gotcha!" he said, chuckling happily. He withdrew his hand as she blinked at him. "I was moving too fast to be sure, so I opened my hand." He frowned. "It didn't hurt, did it?"

Hinata shook her head, not trusting her voice. She knew she was blushing, but also realized that her whole face was red from exertion, so it hopefully did not show. In fact, she was dripping with sweat and it was becoming difficult to keep her arms from trembling. Naruto's face was a little flushed, but that was it. She was a little disturbed that he wasn't even breathing very hard.

"Very good, both of you," Kurenai-sensei called out. "Adaptation, Improvisation. But your weaknesses are not your techniques. Experience will only improve you both."

Kurenai sparred with Shino next, to give them a breather. Predictably, her Sensei was noticeably faster and stronger than Shino. Hinata's attention, however, was focused more on the blond sitting on the grass next to her. He didn't even look like he'd been

exercising now, and she wondered if he'd just been playing with her while they were sparring. *I should have known I wasn't really that good,* she mused reproachfully as she pressed her forefingers together.

She was jolted out of her thoughts by Naruto's elbow. "All those palm strikes were times you would have used chakra to shut me down?" he asked her.

Hinata nodded silently. Aside from Kurenai explaining the reasons why they trained together, it wasn't that like Jyuuken was that big a secret. Her family's famous techniques were described, in a general fashion, during the History lectures at the Konoha Ninja Academy.

Naruto rubbed at the back of his head. "Then I guess I got you twice and you would have demolished me at least a dozen. That's pretty good!"

Hinata turned and stared at the boy, but he didn't seem to be mocking her.

Kurenai smiled as she put Shino through the wringer. The boy was a little larger and physically stronger than his teammates, and for the most part he hadn't been challenged that much the day before. She had a feeling that the boy was actually a bit more talented than he let on. As reserved as the boy's father had been, she realized that she shouldn't be surprised that his son would treat the academy like an infiltration assignment.

In the back of her mind, Kurenai again wondered at how clueless the academy examiners seemed to be. *If we are teaching children to be shinobi,* she mused, *then why should we expect straightforward tests of their abilities to be accurate?* Some students would excel at those of course. The Uchiha boy, Sasuke, seemed to have something to prove, so he would of course push himself to become the top of his class.

But those might prove to be the exceptions.

She'd stayed after the meeting where the Genins were assigned and grilled Iruka for everything he could tell her about his charges. The chuunin was a little disconcerted by her attention, but gratified that she was actually interested in his observations, as well as the examination grades. In those, Shino was said to be merely average at taijutsu. He was more than capable of defeating someone without training, but was barely above the bottom third of his class at the academy.

But now, placed on the spot against a superior opponent, the boy was executing blocks and counters at a level of proficiency approaching that of a chuunin. "You've been holding out on us," she accused as she drove a spear-hand strike at his mid-section. He silently blocked with the edge of his wrist and sent a back-fist strike against her temple. Kurenai stepped into it and blocked with her forearm. She brought up an unnoticed knee and tapped Shino in the stomach.

He nodded, acknowledging her point, and stepped back into a ready stance again.

She sent a kick at his midsection, but when he went to block, she pulled her foot back, re-chambered the kick, and launched it again at his head. He ducked his head, but her heel clipped his shoulder on the way down. Shino drove two fingers into the hollow of her knee and she barely managed to pull her leg back before his nerve strike numbed it.

"You didn't learn that at the academy," she observed as he deflected a ridge-hand strike she aimed at his floating ribs. "Extra training with your family?" she asked as she blocked his counterstrike at her stomach.

Shino pushed back against her block and his feet slipped backwards a few inches on the grass. That evidently was his aim as that motion gave him enough room to bring his foot up and kick. She caught his ankle between her palms and gave his leg a sharp twist. He leapt upward and retracted his leg, pulling himself closer for a knife-hand

strike at her face. The move was unexpected and well-timed, and she barely pulled her head back in time to avoid it. As it was, his fingertips ghosted across the skin of her forehead. She used her grip on his ankle to throw him back and he somersaulted backwards once before rolling onto his feet and rising into a low crouch.

"Very good, Shino," Kurenai said approvingly. "But if you wish to remain on this team, you will not hold back during our training sessions. I can understand your caution within the academy, but there should be no secrets between teammates." She saw Naruto give a guilty start out of the corner of her eye and knew he'd gotten the message as well.

Shino merely nodded at this, which she accepted with good grace. She'd get him talking. Eventually… Maybe.

After that, Naruto sparred with Shino, and had a noticeably harder time landing a hit than he did the day before. Kurenai also took the opportunity to work with Hinata on her blocking techniques. Kobaru-sensei had done the same for her, many years ago. There were ways to angle the arms and legs that increased one's leverage. These modified blocks were not taught at the Konoha Ninja Academy because they required superior speed and timing to execute properly. For an agile kunoichi who possessed less upper-body strength than her male counterparts, however, they were ideal.

Hinata took to the techniques avidly, and Kurenai could tell she was flattered to be getting any individual instruction at all. If she didn't already despise Hiashi, the Hyuuga girl's reactions would drive her to do so. When she explained why she was showing the girl the alternate techniques, Hinata just nodded thoughtfully. Kurenai was embarrassed to remember how she had given Kobaru a very hard time about his insinuation that she was weaker than Mattai or Nomaru.

After about half an hour of this, switching off sparring partners every few minutes, Kurenai found all of her genins to be somewhat worse for the wear. Naruto's new uniform was covered with dust and bits of

grass from all the times he'd been knocked down. At the same time, he was also smiling broadly as he helped Hinata, who'd slipped to one knee after successfully blocking his last kick. The Hyuuga girl was red-faced and barely able to stand, and Shino's chest moved rapidly enough to inform his teacher that he was breathing hard.

"All right, that's a good start. We can walk to cool down and let our muscles relax. I can tell we definitely need to work on endurance training. Make sure you follow the exercises I gave you, and ask me if anything is unclear." With that, she led them out of the training area and through the outskirts of the village.

The villagers they passed had very different reactions to the genins placed in her charge. Hinata's eyes and unadorned forehead marked her as a member of one of Konoha's oldest and most powerful families. People who didn't know her gave her at least a respectful nod, and she returned those she noticed.

Shino's clothing and glasses marked him as an Aburame, and most people gave him a wide berth. A few glanced downward at their arms and legs, as if to make sure a bug hadn't crawled up onto them. Kurenai did have to wonder how commonplace it was for a member of Shino's clan to 'tag' the people around them with the scent-producing female kikai bugs. The one she'd worked with explained that it helped him differentiate his teammates to the 'allies' he'd stationed on guard duty. It also proved useful when a member of their team had been ambushed and wounded, and they needed to find him quickly. Of course, that didn't mean she was *comfortable* with the idea of someone ordering a bug to crawl onto her body and hide itself. She'd probably need to talk to Shino about that the next time she could speak to him alone.

While Shino seemed either uninterested or unperturbed by the villagers' reactions, the same could not be said of Naruto. Maybe it was his acceptance by Iruka; maybe it was her own agreement that his treatment was unjustified. In any event, as Naruto received his normal allotment of angry glares and muttered oaths, he began to

glare back. Soon he was walking with his hands fisted at his sides, on legs stiff with anger and resentment.

Privately, Kurenai wondered if this wasn't a healthier attitude for him than his previous denial. At the same time, it wouldn't do for him to get into an altercation with random villagers. She resolved to let him work through his feelings on his own, but keep a close eye on him and offer advice if asked.

By the time they'd arrived at the Hokage's tower, everyone appeared to have recovered from the sparring. She led them up the stairs to the top floor, and told the chuunins on duty that they were "Team 8 reporting for assignment". At her words, she noticed Naruto straighten his posture with pride, and even Hinata stopped looking downward for a moment.

The Sandaime looked pleased to see them, and his eyes seemed to linger on Naruto's new clothes. His eyes then met hers, and she couldn't suppress a mild blush at the approval she saw in them.

"You're just in time, jonin Kurenai," the Hokage said. "We still have a few D-rank missions left." Kurenai inclined her head respectfully as the old man shuffled through a stack of papers on his desk. "There we are," he said, pulling one out. "I need you to report to Herbalist Yukitaza in the western district, near the river. He suffered a broken leg last week while working on his roof and needs some help."

Kurenai led her students down to the exit, trying not to laugh at the confusion on Naruto's face, and echoed somewhat on Hinata's. "As a new genin team," she began before they even had a chance to ask her, "you will be assigned D-rank missions until you have completed a good number of them." She specifically avoided saying how many, because she wanted to have the option of delaying their first C-rank mission until she was sure they were ready.

"D-rank missions," she continued, "are judged to be little or no threat, and should rarely, if ever, involve travel beyond the outer walls of Konoha. They are tasks that still need doing, will give you all an

opportunity to practice working together, and will supply you with a little pocket money when you are done."

She paused on a street corner while they digested this. Naruto still looked a little rebellious, but resigned to his fate. She stepped up the pace a little as they made their way to the western quarter of the village. When she rang the bell at the door of the house described in the mission briefing, a voice called out for them to come around to the rear deck.

Herbalist Yukitaza proved to be a middle-aged unmarried man with a large cast on his left leg. He made a short double-take when he recognized Naruto, but didn't react in any other way.

Soon, Kurenai and Shino were working on the roof repairs, the Aburame boy having reluctantly mentioned helping his father perform a similar task last winter. Hinata and Naruto were put to work weeding the client's large garden plot, a task better suited to their smaller statures.

They'd been working for a few minutes when Kurenai was startled to realize that it was Naruto carrying the next load of wood up the ladder. She looked over at Shino, who just shrugged.

"Naruto," she said puzzled, "I thought you were going to help Hinata with the garden?"

Naruto grunted and laid the boards down on the shallow pitched roof. "There wasn't enough room," he said.

Kurenai frowned and looked out over the back yard. Hinata was working on the garden plot, along with about twenty Narutos.

Kurenai turned back to Naruto. "They can all work independently?" she asked. Bunshins were usually only capable of limited thought, following simple and straightforward commands.

Naruto shrugged. "Why shouldn't they?" he asked.

Kurenai wasn't quite sure how to answer that question. Naruto shook his head and turned to go back down the ladder. Unfortunately, he evidently forgot about the stack of boards he'd just put down, because he tripped over them and tumbled off the roof.

Kurenai lunged forward, hoping to catch the boy, but it was too late. She reached the edge of the roof just as Naruto hit the ground… and disappeared in a puff of smoke. She stopped, staring at the vapors that rapidly dissipated. *I was talking to one of his Bunshin and didn't even realize it,* she mused. *What the hell **is** that boy?* She looked out at the garden, where Hinata had just grabbed Naruto's arm to prevent him from pulling up a plant that wasn't a weed. He scratched at the back of his head, embarrassed, not even noticing how Hinata pulled her hands back from his arm like they were burned. Not did he notice her blush, for all that it was brighter than his own. *He's Uzumaki Naruto,* Kurenai reminded herself ruefully, *and he breaks the rules without even realizing it.*

Naruto and Hinata finished the garden in less than twenty minutes, with a clone starting at both ends of each row and Hinata using her Byakugan to supervise. With her ability to look in all directions at once, she could see if he missed anything or was about to pull something that wasn't a weed. The latter happened a little more often than Naruto would have liked, but Hinata didn't tease him about it. In fact, she seemed to worry that she wasn't doing her fair share of the work.

Naruto wasn't any expert on girls, or kunoichi, by any stretch of the imagination. But he suspected that most of his female classmates would have been glad of an excuse to not get their hands dirty, rather than worrying that they weren't doing enough. He tried to tell Hinata that he appreciated her attitude, but when the words came out of his mouth it sounded more like "I like how you're like a boy, instead of a girl" and she became very upset and then confused when he tried to explain.

"I mean, you're not like Sakura or Ino," he said quickly.

Hinata ducked her head down and looked even sadder. "I- I know," she said hesitantly.

"But that's a good thing," Naruto said quickly. *Did she like Sakura and Ino?* He wondered. *I don't remember ever seeing them talk, but they are all girls – they're like some secret society.*

"I-it is?" she asked. Her forefingers were pressed together so hard that the skin had turned white.

"I – I mean, they are nice and all… I'm not saying they are ugly or anything," Naruto added quickly. If they were all friends and it got back to those two that he said they were ugly, genin or not, he was a dead shinobi.

Hinata frowned, perplexed. "A-ano… I…" she swallowed. "Naruto-kun, I don't understand what you mean."

"I'm just saying… well… I'm glad you're on my team," Naruto said firmly. There. No one could interpret anything bad out of that, right?

Hinata stiffened like she'd been slapped, then quickly turned away.

Naruto's mouth dropped open. He started to step around her to ask what he'd said when she pointed at one of his clones.

"S-stop. He's about to pull a good plant," she said in a choked voice.

Naruto whirled toward the offending clone. "You heard her," he barked.

"Take it easy, baka," the clone said. "You're acting like she's your girlfriend or something."

An instant later the clone disappeared as Naruto's fist transited through the space its head once occupied. "S-sorry," he apologized. "Sometimes they get a little smart-mouthed when they know their time is almost up."

"We a-appear to be almost done, Naruto," Hinata said in a quiet voice, still not facing him. "I will go inside and help Yukitaza-san with the kitchen."

Naruto glared at the remaining Bunshin as Hinata silently walked toward the house. All of them stayed bent over, peering carefully at the ground as they finished the weeding.

After finishing outside, Naruto went indoors to help with the cleaning. Hinata was silent as he passed through the kitchen, very intently focused on dicing up some vegetables Herbalist Yukitaza had delivered earlier that day. After locating the cleaning supplies, Naruto created another set of clones and put them to work tidying up. Fortunately, this was something he knew quite well how to do, having had to clean up his own apartment for years. He finished as Kurenai and Shino came down from the roof. Naruto sent his clones out to put away the tools and the ladders.

Hinata was still busy in the kitchen, so Naruto and Shino were sent to make some deliveries to their client's customers. Kurenai-sensei decided she would help Hinata finish. She gave Naruto a piercing look as she announced this, and he felt the back of his neck grow hot.

As he ran down the street with a small bundle of herbs, Naruto tried to figure out what he'd done wrong. It wasn't like he'd asked the stupid Bunshin to mouth off. Maybe Hinata thought it was saying something Naruto was thinking, and that was why she'd been offended. It sort of made sense in a way. Sakura always hit him soon after he'd asked her out. Naruto realized that his attempts to be friendly with her seemed to always make her angry at him. Maybe it was something about him, maybe it was some aura given off by that bastard fox. Perhaps it was a side-effect of the seal used to imprison his unwanted tenant. Maybe a seal strong enough to repel a demon would also repel any girls he came into contact with as well.

He scowled as he knocked on the door of his bundle's destination. An old woman opened it and Naruto handed her the package before

she had a chance to realize who he was. "This is from Herbalist Yukitaza. He broke his leg and can't make his own deliveries today." With that, he spun and was halfway back to the street before the woman had a chance to speak.

Naruto stuffed his hands into his jacket pockets as he made his way back to the Herbalist's newly cleaned and repaired house. It was bad enough how people hated him for something that happened the day he was born, but now he was pissing off everyone else – even when he was trying to be nice.

When he returned to the house, Hinata and Kurenai had finished up in the kitchen. With the deliveries made, the last tasks for their 'mission' were completed. The Herbalist thanked them for their help, and even looked Naruto in the eye, which impressed him a little.

"Not quite an hour and a half," Kurenai said after they made their goodbyes. "That was very quick. Good use of your Bunshins, Naruto, and coordinating with Hinata to make sure there were no problems. I'm very pleased with your teamwork, both of you."

Naruto felt the knot of resentment in his middle loosen a bit. Hinata's reaction, however, caught his eye. She looked down, pushing her fingers together as her cheeks turned red. When she noticed him staring, she turned completely away. He frowned and let out a sigh. Evidently she was still mad at him or something.

As they made their way back toward the center of the village, Kurenai peered up at the afternoon sun. "At this point, I doubt the Hokage has any missions left to give out. Let's get together a little earlier tomorrow. If we work as fast as we did today, we can probably clear two missions a day. I'll see you all at the training ground at ten, all right?"

Everyone nodded, and then Kurenai pulled some slips of paper from her pouch. "A friend of mine gave these to me, but I have something I need to do tonight, so I thought you three could use them." She handed one to each of her genins.

It was a coupon for Ichiraku, good for a large bowl at half price. Naruto's stomach rumbled, but the way things were going he thought he'd rather eat alone.

"Thank you, Sensei," he said, though he imagined his voice sounded a little subdued. His team-mates echoed his thanks, though he noticed Shino looking at him a little oddly.

Naruto also felt his sensei's eyes boring into him. "Well, you'd better get going before the dinner rush starts," she said. "You probably shouldn't stay out too late. Oh, before you go, Naruto, I needed to talk to you about your taijutsu training. You can catch up with the others."

Naruto let out a quiet sigh as Shino and Hinata headed off to Ichiraku's.

"Okay Naruto," Kurenai said. "I need you to let Gai know tomorrow morning that I'll be working with you all on genjutsu recognition week after next. He can send Tenten and Lee over to training area nineteen at noon, so they can participate. Got that?"

Naruto nodded and repeated back the relevant details.

"Good," Kurenai said, nodding her approval. "Now, would you like to explain why you are less than enthusiastic about sharing a meal with your team-mates?"

Naruto rubbed at the back of his neck. "I seem to have annoyed them at some point today."

"Shino seems to be acting normally towards you," Kurenai observed.

Naruto stayed silent.

"So it's Hinata," she surmised. "Did this happen after you paid her some complement?"

Naruto's mouth stayed shut, but his head betrayed him by giving a quick nod.

"I see," Kurenai said. She gazed down at him for several moments. "It probably isn't my place to say anything," she finally spoke, "but I've noticed that she doesn't always know what to do when someone says something positive about her. I wouldn't take it too personally, Naruto."

"Why is that?" he asked, genuinely puzzled.

Kurenai shook her head. "Why don't you ask her yourself?"

Naruto opened his mouth, and then closed it. It was obvious to him that Kurenai-sensei knew more than she was saying, but she wanted him to find out for himself. "Why are you making such a mystery out of things?"

Kurenai looked down at him and gave a faint smile. "I know things about you that you would probably prefer that I keep to myself. Please extend your team-mates the same courtesy."

Naruto's stomach lurched when the meaning of her words sunk in. "G-gomen," he said quickly.

Kurenai sighed and shook her head. "No need to apologize, Naruto. You are still learning how a team works, and what a sensei does for their students. Just keep in mind that I'm probably helping other people in ways similar to how I help you." She cocked her head, frowning, as the afternoon light glistened on her mane of black hair. "Naruto, this is usually hard for someone your age to really understand, but keep in mind that not everything that happens around you is about you."

Naruto frowned and scratched the side of his head as his mind raced. "So, what you're saying is that she didn't act that way because she's mad at me?"

"I'm saying that might be the case," Kurenai replied cryptically, "or more likely it's a combination of things, and who you are played only a contributing role in the outcome."

Naruto nodded slowly. "I think I understand, a little. I don't understand why this has to be so complicated though."

"People have been asking that question for a long time," Kurenai replied in a serious voice.

Naruto let out a sigh. "It's not going to get any easier, is it?"

"Probably not," Kurenai said with a slight smile. "But few worthwhile things are easy, are they?"

"I guess not. Thanks for explaining some of this," Naruto said, straightening. His stomach decided to lighten the mood by letting out a low rumble.

"That's partly my job, you know," his sensei said with a sad smile. "Real life examples of looking 'underneath the underneath' seem to work the best. But… you'd better get going before they eat all the ramen."

Naruto knew she was just teasing him, but his pulse still sped up at the thought. After a quick bow, he began racing off across the rooftops to catch up with his team. He heard the quiet laughter that followed him, but, recognizing her voice, he just smiled himself.

He caught sight of Shino and Hinata blocks before they reached the ramen stand. He landed lightly on the pavement behind them, but still they both turned as one to look at him. *Well, we are supposed to be a reconnaissance team* , he mused. "I, er, had to talk to sensei about my extra training," he said. It was technically true, and much less embarrassing to admit.

"Ano, what does your scroll say?" Hinata asked. "We've been comparing ours, and Kurenai-san has put a lot of detail into the

plans."

"She didn't give me a scroll," Naruto said with a slight smile, "she arranged for me to work with another jonin in the morning. Some guy by the name of Maito Gai."

Shino looked at him, and Naruto swore the skin above his glasses began to draw together, like he was frowning. "I've heard of him, he's a renowned taijutsu specialist."

Naruto bit his tongue before it could start bragging. If Kurenai-sensei was correct, these were not the people around which he needed to put up a false front. In a heretofore rare flash of insight, he realized that Shino might interpret Naruto's morning training with another jonin as a sign of favoritism. "I hope so," he said with a theatrical sigh. "She said my taijutsu was such a mess that she didn't think she could fix it without help."

Hinata just stared at him as Naruto gave a sheepish shrug. Shino's brow, however, smoothed out and he gave a thoughtful nod. "Then it's good that you are both taking this so seriously."

Naruto shrugged. "How am I going to beat you down if I don't?" he asked innocently, then began to whistle tonelessly as he walked past his teammates. "We'd better get there before the noodles get cold," he said.

He turned back to see Shino and Hinata exchange a wordless glance before they began walking again.

The old man who ran Ichiraku always seemed pleased to see his best customer. "Hey Naruto, who are your friends?" he asked. Until recently, he and his daughter were the only people Naruto knew who were likely to even notice if he dropped dead in his apartment. At least, until the smell bothered the neighbors, he reminded himself.

Still, if anyone deserved a smile, the gracious man about to serve the noodles surely did. Shino and Hinata had silently walked up on

either side of him, so he put a hand on each of their shoulders as he answered. "These are my team-mates, Ichiraku-san!"

"Well, why haven't you brought them here before?" the old man asked.

"Well, we just became Team 8 yesterday, and we had a practice, and…" Naruto explained until he noticed the man was smiling and waving his hand from side to side.

"Naruto, I was just joking with you. Seriously now, aren't you going to introduce your friends?"

"Gomen," Naruto said quickly. "This is Aburame Shino and Hyuuga Hinata."

"I'm pleased to meet you both!" he replied. "Have a seat and I'll get you some menus, take all the time you want to decide – we have a lot of flavors to choose from."

Naruto, of course, already knew what he wanted. He used Kurenai's coupon to order a large bowl of pork ramen at half price, and after checking his wallet ordered another bowl of miso-flavored ramen. Shino ordered a bowl of beef ramen, while Hinata eventually settled on miso ramen.

Everyone was quiet after the noodles arrived. Their labors seemed to have given them an appetite, because their mouths were kept too busy for conversation for a good while.

Surprisingly enough, it was Shino who finally broke the silence. "Our sensei was impressed by your Bunshin," he said without preamble.

Naruto frowned. "What do you mean?"

"The one that carried the wood up to the roof," the bug-user replied cryptically. "I don't think she expected to be able to hold a conversation with one."

"Why not?" Naruto asked. "If it's a copy of me, shouldn't it be able to talk?"

"Most Bunshin jutsus don't even produce solid copies," Shino explained. "And while there are some that do produce copies of the user that can touch things, those copies are usually not very self-aware. At first, we thought it was you talking to us."

Naruto stuck his lower lip out. "So you're saying I'm so dumb that you couldn't tell the difference between me and a mindless clone?" He thought he heard a sharp inhalation coming from the stool on the other side of him, where Hinata was sitting.

Shino looked at him for a long moment. "Your attempt at self-deprecating humor is noted, but not necessary. The thrust of my remarks was that your clones are unusually self-aware, a reflection of the degree of skill and energy used in their creation."

"Oh," was all Naruto could say to that. "Er, thanks, Shino."

The Aburame boy nodded gravely. Naruto finished his pork ramen and started on the miso-flavored bowl. He wondered why Kurenai-sensei hadn't said anything to him about the Bunshin. He concluded that she probably didn't want him to get a swelled head and start acting like Uchiha-teme. But that didn't explain why Shino decided to bring it up on his own. Then he remembered the boy's disparaging remark yesterday after his botched attempt at Kage Bunshin no Jutsu. Naruto supposed he might have felt the need to make up for his previous comment, even though Naruto had mostly forgotten it a day later. While the boy's reserve and exceptionally quiet and precise manner were a little unusual to deal with, that same precision and rectitude would also make him a very reliable team-mate. Oddly enough, Naruto found himself warming a bit toward the silent shinobi.

Of course, such an introspective mood was not meant to last. Naruto's train of thought was neatly derailed when he felt a spike of

killing intent coming from the street behind him. He twisted on his stool to see what was happening.

Looking somewhat bruised and dirty, Kiba, Sakura, and Sasuke were walking up the street. Sakura was chattering happily about some test involving bells and Naruto felt his stomach quiver happily for an instant. Then he remembered her words on the park bench and the warm feeling died. The killing glare, of course, was coming from Sasuke. Naruto wondered if the famed Uchiha genius even figured out why Naruto had taken his place. *Probably not,* he concluded, *for a genius, he doesn't have much imagination.*

Naruto returned his rival's glare and bared his teeth. He knew his slightly enlarged canines sometimes made adults a little nervous, but he didn't fully appreciate why this was so until a couple of days ago.

The whole thing might have ended with an exchange of glares if Kiba hadn't asked Sasuke a question. When he didn't get an answer, the Inuzuka boy looked over at his team-mate and flinched at the facial expression he saw. Kiba frowned, evidently searching for the source of Sasuke's ire. Finally he seemed to notice Naruto, seated at the counter of Ichiraku Ramen, twisted around in his seat to return Sasuke's stare.

Kiba gritted his teeth and his spiky hair seemed to puff up as he stalked over toward Naruto. "Do you have a problem with my team-mate?" he asked in a voice that was little more than a growl.

Naruto didn't answer, but instead kept his eyes locked onto Sasuke's face. He did notice that the Uchiha boy's upper lip was curled, perhaps in annoyance at Kiba's interference.

"What is your problem?" Kiba asked again, a little louder this time.

"Mind your own business," Naruto said, glaring back at Sasuke. Sakura had also stopped, and looked back and forth between the two of them.

"Kiba," Shino said reasonably as he stood up, "Naruto and Sasuke have never really gotten along. We should probably just stay out of it."

The dog-user frowned at the bug-user. "Who are you to tell me what to do, Aburame? We just spent all day on Kakashi-sensei's stupid bell test, and we're the first team he's ever passed!"

Kiba threw out his chest with that last statement, and Shino's eyebrows became visible over his glasses. "Our teacher did not make us perform any additional tests beyond a basic skills assessment, so she must be confident in our abilities. Instead, we completed our first mission today."

Kiba snorted. "So? Just because you got an easy sensei… I got a look at *her* when she picked you up. *She* decided to go easy on you."

Shino stiffened as Naruto stood up from his seat. Naruto swore he heard a low buzzing coming from somewhere nearby. Sasuke scowled at Kiba's back, but he approached the ramen stand along with Sakura.

Fortunately, the Haruno girl stepped forward and grabbed Kiba's elbow. "Don't you dare insult their teacher just because she's a woman! Would you want your sister to hear you say that? Or your mother?"

Kiba winced, seemingly in spite of himself, and Naruto had to stifle a snicker. He was a little surprised when Hinata spoke up as well.

"A-ano," she said, "Shinobi are not allowed to fight in public. I, er, don't want to see any of us get in trouble so soon after graduating."

Shino's brow furrowed, but he gave a short nod and sat back down.

"Right Hinata!" Sakura agreed with the girl. "Leave it to the *women,"* she sneered at Kiba as she emphasized the word, "to keep their

heads in a crisis." She smiled at the Hyuuga girl. "It's not worth any of us getting in trouble, just because Naruto-baka is too stupid to leave Sasuke alone."

That last insult, so gratuitously added, was the last straw for Naruto. Sakura was playing the peacemaker here, but she still made time to insult him. Her precious Sasuke was glaring at *him* , while he was just trying to eat his ramen.

Well, to hell with it, and to hell with them.

He got up from his stool so abruptly that it fell over. He pushed past Kiba so brusquely that the larger boy took a half-step backwards. Kiba reached out for Naruto's shoulder, but the smaller boy used the heel of his hand to knock Kiba's hand loose before he even had a chance to get a grip. Akamaru let out a low growl as the Inuzuka boy leaned against the wall of the restaurant.

Hinata felt her jaw drop, along with her stomach, as her team-mate angrily marched away. She felt almost worn away by all the emotional reversals she'd been through that day. First Naruto's stumbling comments in the garden had mortified her, as if he was saying she made him think she was a boy.

When he tried to explain what he meant, it only got worse. He seemed to be saying that she wasn't pretty or nice like the other two girls in their graduating class… but that wasn't right, or else he wouldn't seem so confused. Then he finally said that he was glad she was on his team.

Hinata couldn't remember anyone ever expressing happiness at her presence, not since her mother died. His simple, heartfelt statement almost made her faint. As it was, she had to turn away because her face was blushing as red as a tomato. She'd had difficulty talking to him after that, and it wasn't until Kurenai-sensei came to help her in the kitchen that she began to organize her thoughts.

Kurenai was nothing, if not observant, and she soon had Hinata explaining the whole situation. The older woman chuckled a little when the genin repeated Naruto's words. She advised Hinata in a more serious voice that any future compliments she received from the Uzumaki boy were likely to be just as heartfelt and incoherent. It was funny how her sensei seemed so sure that would happen, but Hinata knew better.

She really didn't want anyone to get in trouble for fighting, especially Naruto. She suspected that he would receive more of the blame than he deserved if there was an altercation. Hinata did not miss the looks the villagers gave him as they walked together. She knew Naruto was often laughed at by the other students at the Konoha Ninja Academy. But she hadn't realized how the villagers in the street reacted to him. It seemed almost, familiar, in a way. It took a while before Hinata realized that she'd seen that degree of distaste before – in the faces of the Hyuuga clan elders when they talked of her failures.

Still, Naruto passed through it without comment, merely returning the more virulent glares. Hinata didn't know whether to be impressed by his fortitude in the face of such dislike, or to be heartbroken that the boy didn't seem to regard it as anything unusual. Nonetheless, she feared that a public brawl would make people hate him even worse, especially since it would have involved genins from several prominent families.

Between her and Sakura, they'd managed to remind the others of the rules, and at least partially defuse the tensions between the two teams. She was grateful to the pink-haired kunoichi, and started to shyly return the girl's smile when Sakura decided to insult Naruto and blame him for the whole situation.

Sakura's attitude toward Naruto was well known to Hinata, but the white-eyed girl was surprised to see her still lash out at him while supposedly in the role of a peace-maker. This hypocrisy wasn't lost on Naruto either, because he visibly flinched, then got up from his stool so quickly that she was afraid he was going to attack someone.

Instead, he just brushed past Kiba, who was also standing closer than was strictly polite.

Sakura rolled her eyes and sighed. "He's always such a baby," she groused. Kiba scowled, shaking the hand that Naruto knocked away.

Hinata, who'd been staring after her team-mate, turned toward the other girl. The new emotion she'd started feeling on Naruto's behalf began to simmer within her. Her Byakugan activated on their own, and Hinata was surprised by a sudden desire to close all of the girl's Tenketsu points.

Close up, the distended blood vessels and enlarged pupils that characterized her family's advanced bloodline looked rather disturbing. Hinata had always been embarrassed about this before, but now she was secretly pleased when the Haruno girl stepped back suddenly. "What's wrong?" the girl asked.

"You should not say such things to Naruto!" Hinata said in a voice that was little more than a whisper.

Sakura gaped at her for a moment, but then her eyes grew canny. "I understand," she said. "But just because you like him doesn't mean he isn't-"

"I think you fail to understand," Shino interrupted, "that Naruto was wholly focused on his food until Sasuke made his presence known - his killing intent was noticeable to all of us. Your condemnation of Naruto is therefore illogical. I think you also fail to comprehend that it is possible to feel loyalty toward team-mates in the absence of romantic attachment." The bug-user looked from Sasuke to Kiba, ignoring the shocked silence caused by him actually speaking up. "You have my sympathies," he told the dog-user in a matter-of-fact tone.

Sasuke let out a "hmph", but didn't dispute anything Shino said.

Hinata wrapped her fingers around the hem of her jacket. "A-ano, Shino-san, I think I've had enough ramen."

Shino looked at her for a moment before nodding. He looked at the cooling remains of his beef ramen. "You are correct, it is best hot, and our meal has been interrupted." He turned to the older man and bowed, a motion Hinata quickly echoed. They left their money next to Naruto's and then Shino led the way as they left Ichiraku.

As Hinata and Shino walked side-by-side down the street, she could hear the man's voice carrying in the late afternoon air: "I would appreciate it if you young punks would not run off my customers!"

It was several minutes before Hinata found her voice again. "A-arigatou, Shino-san."

Shino's head turned toward her, even as he continued to walk forward. "My observations were accurate and relevant. No thanks are necessary."

Hinata absorbed this carefully as they continued down the street. "Gomen," she finally said, "but you seem to have changed your opinion regarding Naruto-kun?"

Shino was quiet for a moment, and Hinata worried that her question had offended the boy. "I am… re-evaluating my assessment," he finally said. "Kurenai-sensei seems to bring out qualities in him that were not apparent in his conduct at the academy. A skilled observer must always be willing to challenge his preconceptions if new data contradicts."

Finally, they reached an intersection where Hinata need to turn to reach the Hyuuga compound. "I will see you tomorrow," she said quietly.

"At ten," Shino agreed.

Hinata nodded and turned toward her home. She noticed the sky slowly darkening in the East as a warm summer evening approached Konoha. It seemed impossible that so much had happened in the span of a handful of hours, and she wondered if life would always be like that around her new friends.

That thought fortified her as she walked, steeling herself for her father's inevitable questions.

A/N:

Some of you may be asking why the pace of updates has slowed down a little. The answers to this and other questions may be found on my Yahoo Group, Viridian Dreams, the URL for which is in my profile.

That's also the only place to get access to my original fiction!

Thanks for reading!

-Matthew

# Geniuses of Hard Work

Chapter 4

Naruto leapt from roof to roof as dawn began streaking the eastern sky. He flexed his left hand repeatedly, trying to work out the annoying tingles. On Kurenai-sensei's advice, he'd picked up a field alarm at one of the outfitter shops.

A shinobi on a mission might desire to wake at a specific time, or to limit the amount of rest he did allow himself to take. However, a conventional alarm clock was far too noisy to use when a mission might require stealth. At some point an extremely clever Cloud shinobi devised a portable clock powered by small, but powerful batteries, charged with a simple raiton jutsu. Instead of ringing a bell to wake its owner, the ninja-clock sent a pulse of electricity through a pair of wires attached to the owner's body.

Naruto slipped the metal rings onto his fingers before finally falling asleep the previous night, trusting the device to wake him for his training session. The problem was that he stayed up fairly late beforehand. He'd been upset after the confrontation at Ichiraku's, and the thought of his team-mates listening to Sakura berate him just made his stomach twist even worse.

He didn't really understand why Shino and Hinata were willing to treat him differently than the others. A small part of him wondered if they would suddenly 'wake up' and see him like everyone else. The niggling fear of that occurring kept him from even thinking about taking Kurenai's advice. He'd rather no one ever knew about his prisoner.

Such thoughts kept Naruto awake far later than he realized, and he'd evidently slept through the first several pulses of his new alarm clock. Whoever built this particular model must have had some experience with sound sleepers, though. The pulse that finally woke

him up left his hand numb and tingling. That complicated things as he rushed around his small apartment, trying to get ready with only one hand working well.

Still, he did manage to make it on time, and arrived at the designated training area at the stroke of six. Of course, what he found there immediately had him wondering if he was still asleep and dreaming.

Gai… sensei… he supposed… was a large, muscular man in a green leotard. The outfit was loose on his frame, for which Naruto was grateful, and over it he wore a chuunin vest. Topping all of this was the ugliest bowl cut Naruto had ever seen.

Though the one on the kid standing next to him was close competition.

Standing next to Gai was a half-size duplicate that Naruto supposed was this Rock Lee person. He didn't have the vest, though he did have the orange leg-warmers that matched with nothing else. After meeting Kurenai-sensei, Naruto was beginning to dislike that color for some reason.

"Ah, you are right on time!" The man boomed in a loud voice that seemed to have no business belonging to a ninja. "You must be eager to start banking the fires of your youth!"

Naruto had no idea what that just meant, so he used one of Kurenai-sensei's parting words of advice. He just smiled and nodded.

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Hours later, Naruto was bruised, tired, and hungry. Despite his 'handicap' with ninjutsus, Rock Lee was still a formidable opponent. He proved this by beating Naruto senseless every time they sparred. Possibly the most irritating thing about this experience was that eerie smile he wore the whole time. Naruto was used to a variety of expressions from his opponents. Sneers and emotionless masks he was used to, having known both Sasuke and Shino. Scowls were the

norm with Kiba, and bored calculation was to be expected from Shikamaru.

But Rock and his teammates were from the previous year's graduating class at the Konoha Ninja Academy, so Naruto had never sparred with him before. It was a little odd to fight someone who never stopped grinning, even on the rare occasions when Naruto actually managed to land a blow.

Gai-sensei's idea of training consisted of Naruto and Lee sparring for nearly two hours straight, while he watched and nodded thoughtfully. By the end, Naruto realized that Lee was starting to take it easy on him, which actually stung his pride a little bit. That drove him to fight even harder, but every blow he landed was just further proof that Lee was holding back.

Finally, the older boy went to make one of his flying spin-kicks, but was just a hair slow on the launch. Instead of ducking or blocking, Naruto stepped inside the kick and sunk his left first into the boy's stomach.

Lee fell down, for the first time that morning. When he got up, he was still smiling, but he nodded and Naruto realized he was breathing heavily.

"Yosh!" Gai said, startling the genin, "Kurenai was right. You will make a most challenging sparring partner for my Lee!"

"No," Naruto said, shaking his head. "I barely hit him at all." He usually didn't let his frustration show like this, but he was tired, cranky, and humiliated at how thoroughly he'd been schooled all morning.

"Naruto…" Gai said in a disappointed voice that made Naruto want to shiver. Something about the man made his skin crawl, just a little. "Don't let the fires of youth gutter out so quickly. Not many of your age can hold their own against Lee, and especially not for two hours.

I've never seen anyone wear him down like that since he became a genin."

Lee abruptly straightened and bowed. "Naruto-san! We must train together! Only then will we become true geniuses of hard work!"

Naruto scratched his head. What the hell were these crazy people talking about? "Geniuses of hard work?" he asked in a dubious voice.

"Yes," Gai said gravely. "Konoha has many geniuses. Lee's teammate Neji is considered a genius by many of the Hyuugas. Uchiha Sasuke in your class was also classified as one. But it is one thing to be born a genius, to be given talent like a gift one has not earned. It is quite another to be like Lee, a genius of hard work. He has no special abilities or skills, only his own determination to be the best. His willingness to work for his goal is more valuable than being any sort of lesser genius, and will take him much farther in the end."

Naruto frowned as he considered the strange jonin's words. It pleased him, just a little, to hear Sasuke described as a lesser type of genius by someone else. But something else he said echoed Kurenai-sensei's words. *A little hard work can make up for a lot… The day will come when Shino and Hinata's lives may depend on you. Mine as well.* He gave a sharp nod as he made up his mind.

"Good… Lee!" Gai barked. "You still need to work on your endurance if Naruto can wear you out! Double your weights and run five laps around Konoha!"

Lee practically cheered at this announcement, which confused Naruto even more. But as the boy strapped heavy bracers to his forearms and began running, Gai took him aside to work on his forms.

Naruto had never had a lot of individual instruction before, so it was a novel experience as Maito Gai had him settle into one fighting stance after another and began correcting his posture and foot

placement. At first, all the tiny adjustments seemed silly. Did it really matter if his lead foot was turned slightly outward instead of slightly inward? But he remembered what Shino had said about the man's reputation, so he did as he was instructed. When Gai then had him shift from one stance to another, using the corrected forms, Naruto was surprised at how different it felt.

His surprise must have been visible, because Gai began to explain the reasons for the corrections. The turned in foot affected how the knee flexed, and allowed him to retreat more fluidly if he faced a strong attack. The slightly flexed rear knee allowed him to chamber a kick with that foot an instant faster. After each explanation, Gai would ease him through the motion, making Naruto repeat it at least three times so the proper form would have a chance to engrave on his memory.

Next they began working on punches and blocks in conjunction with the corrected stances. Everything seemed to flow together much better than Naruto remembered. The man's voice was almost hypnotic as he talked Naruto through all the basic Taijutsu moves. He never seemed to lose patience or become distracted. It was still a little unnerving, but Naruto was more entranced by the way everything seemed to flow together.

Time passed a lot quicker than Naruto realized, because they'd just finished running through all the basics when Lee staggered into the clearing, red-faced and breathing hard. So, of course, Gai immediately had them spar again.

It was slightly more even this time. Lee was clearly winded, though he soon got his breathing back under control. Naruto's Taijutsu was a little smoother, and he occasionally scored a glancing hit on his opponent.

Lee was sweating hard, but he was still smiling as they fought. Dimly, Naruto realized that fighting when he was tired was just one more challenge for the boy, one more way to make himself a little bit

better. Naruto wondered if he should start worrying when such odd people began to make sense to him.

It was after nine o'clock and both boys were considerably worse for the wear when Gai called a halt to the sparring. Naruto brushed some dirt from his sleeve. He wouldn't have time to go home and wash it before he needed to meet his team. Both he and Lee were red-faced and sweating. They both had bits of grass sticking to their uniforms from where they'd been knocked down, and their hands trembled slightly as they froze in their ready positions at Gai's command.

"That's enough for today," Gai said with a nod. "Naruto, you should report to Kurenai. Lee and I will take a jog to cool down. I'll expect to see you here tomorrow at the same time."

Naruto aped Lee's bow to his sensei, and watched with some amusement as Lee struggled to keep up the pace Gai set as they ran out of the training area.

Naruto walked a little slower toward training area nineteen. While he didn't have time to clean up, he was really starving… especially since he hadn't even had time for a cup of instant ramen when he finally woke up that morning.

Now that he'd acknowledged it, his hunger waxed rhapsodic as he made his way down the street. Most village shopkeepers were just opening up for the day, and he'd already spent over three solid hours training and sparring. Being groggy and half-starved, it was no surprise that his feet picked their own route, and he found himself passing Ichiraku's. Surprisingly, it was open, serving hot tea and dumplings to merchants and workers as they began their day.

The old man did a slight double-take when he saw Naruto approach. "I'm sorry, but we haven't even started making the broth for noodles yet."

Naruto tried not to let his disappointment show. "Kurenai-sensei says I need to eat something besides ramen all the time, anyway," he said with a shrug.

"Bite your tongue! She'll put me out of business," the old man said with a laugh. "You look like you've been working hard already. I've got some nice hot tea, how about some rice balls and pickles to go with it?"

Naruto nodded and sat down at the counter. The square plate that was soon placed in front of him was crowded with food, but he wasn't about to complain. The hot tea washed down the sticky rice and made a nice contrast with the sharp taste of the pickles. As he finished, he felt new energy flow into his limbs and knew stopping here had been a good idea. As he was finishing his tea, the old man took his plate and leaned forward a little.

"I'm glad I got to meet your friends last night," he said with a smile as Naruto patted his stomach.

"They aren't friends, so much as…" Naruto began but trailed off. He wasn't completely sure what he wanted to say. They were teammates, and that was it.

"They're good kids," Old man Ichiraku corrected him gently. He smiled ruefully, "they tore those snot-nosed brats a new one after you left."

Naruto wasn't sure he heard the man correctly. "Nani?"

"Yeah," the old man nodded as he collected Naruto's tea cup. "They really didn't seem to like the way those others talked to you. I think that little Hyuuga girl gave that pink-haired one the scare of her life."

"Hinata?" Naruto asked in disbelief.

"Yeah, that was her name," the old man smiled. "She did something weird with her eyes. I couldn't see her do anything with her hands,

but that other girl jumped back like she'd been burned. If that little girl is a Hyuuga, I can see why everyone steps lightly around her clan."

Naruto was confused as he thanked the man and paid for his breakfast. As he resumed his journey toward the training area, he tried to puzzle out their behavior. He didn't know why they stuck up for him, especially since he wasn't even there to see it happen. But knowing they had done so made him feel unaccountably warm.

The more he thought about that, the stranger Naruto felt. He knew as he approached the training area that he needed to do something about this.

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Kurenai was mildly curious as to how Naruto's training session with Gai and Lee would go. She'd been tempted to look in on them, but Gai was a jonin and his senses were particularly acute. He might take offense if he thought she was questioning his abilities, and she didn't want to do anything to jinx the deal they had struck. It was a little unusual by Konoha standards, but she felt it was the best way to get Naruto's level of proficiency up to where it should be. She felt unaccountably pressured in this respect. Perhaps it was that unknown group the Hokage mentioned; maybe it was her own instincts. Either way, she had the feeling that the sooner the boy learned how to effectively defend himself and his teammates, the better.

Hinata arrived first, as seemed to be her habit. She was visibly more composed than she had been the day before. Kurenai hoped that her words, and the successful completion of their first mission, had bought the girl some peace. She hoped that sending her genins out on an obvious team bonding exercise would ease them past any potential tensions that might arise. She was particularly concerned about the Hyuuga girl. If her assessment of the girl's father was accurate, she'd likely need a safe haven within the team. If she was uncomfortable with her teammates, that would not be available.

The girl greeted Kurenai in her usual, hesitant manner, but from her posture, the jonin could tell that something was wrong. "Hinata," she asked as a quiet inspiration overtook her, "how did dinner at Ichiraku go?" Something about the girl's turmoil suggested that it was related to the boy she so admired.

Hinata pressed her lips together, even as her forefingers began to push against each other. Her posture was hunched over as normal, but the quaver in her voice when she spoke was something new to Kurenai's ears. "A-ano… Naruto caught up to us part of the way there… We, we asked him about his extra training, and he told us he was working with Gai-sensei as we walked the rest of the way."

Kurenai frowned at that. She'd hoped the boy would have more sense than to brag like that, but she supposed he was still making up for what had happened in the academy. Still, she'd have to talk to him about this.

Hinata took a calming breath. "When Shino said he'd heard of Gai, Naruto replied that you told him his taijutsu was so bad that you didn't think you could fix it yourself." She paused for a moment, and then continued in a rush. "Why did you say something like that to Naruto? He tries so hard and no one ever gives him any credit."

Kurenai rocked back on her metaphorical heels, but tried not to let anything show on her face. It wasn't like she hadn't actively encouraged Hinata to assert herself when they talked – but it seemed like her words had just been wasted air. And now… this same girl was questioning her judgment where Naruto was concerned. As breakthroughs went, it was a minor thing, but Yuuhi Kurenai had learned as a genin to take whatever successes she could find. How she handled this was important… at least it was if she wanted Hinata to build on this.

"Hyuuga Hinata, before I say anything else, I want you to know that I am pleased that you have taken me at my word when I said I wanted you to ask questions when you don't understand something. This was not a question I had anticipated, but I am pleased that you trust

me enough to ask me about this," Kurenai concluded with a smile. "That said, I would ask you if Shino had any expression on his face when he mentioned Gai-sensei."

Hinata frowned in confusion. "Kurenai-sensei… I did not notice anything, but…" her voice trailed off.

"But you were focusing on Naruto as he spoke," Kurenai supplied helpfully. "I ask this because that was not exactly how I described the situation to Naruto when I told him he would be working with Gai. I think he chose his words so that you and Shino would not think he was receiving favorable treatment. My arrangement with Gai is… unusual among jonin-sensei. Naruto's unusual stamina means that he can make up the time he lost at the academy faster than most. Our… arrangement will facilitate this. It is because of Naruto's strengths, including his willingness to work hard, that this was done."

Hinata looked more than slightly mortified. She ducked her head down again as she stuttered out, "G-gomen, Kurenai-sensei."

"None of that, Hinata," Kurenai said sharply. "Your loyalty to your teammate is commendable, and I specifically instructed you to ask me questions like this. At some point, you may become an advisor to a village leader or ANBU captain. Under those circumstances, not speaking up would be an abandonment of your duties. I am also glad to hear that Naruto was considerate of the feelings of his teammates when a potentially uncomfortable subject was raised."

"Naruto is never cruel," Hinata said quickly, then stopped and swallowed.

"No, he isn't," Kurenai agreed, "but he doesn't always realize when he's giving offense to others, does he? But he means well, and that counts for a lot. All he has to do is just learn to think in another's place, part of seeing 'underneath the underneath'. You have just given me proof that he is making progress in that area and for that I thank you."

Hinata's cheeks pinked and she nodded in acknowledgment.

Kurenai frowned at her and decided to take a stab in the dark. "Something else happened, though, didn't it?"

Hinata let out a sigh and began describing the confrontation with Team 7. Kurenai nodded thoughtfully, smiling when Hinata related the warm greeting Ichiraku's proprietor had given them. She'd have to find an excuse to talk to the man at some point. Naruto might just be a regular customer to the man, but it wouldn't do to make assumptions. She did raise her palm at one point to ask a question. "Are you quite sure you felt the killing intent coming from Sasuke before Naruto turned around?"

Hinata nodded quickly.

"Good," Kurenai said with a smile. "I am glad he did not do anything to provoke Uchiha. I'll be having words with Kakashi about controlling his students if anyone tries to make something of this."

However, Yuuhi Kurenai was highly annoyed by the time Hinata was finished with her story. "I almost hope the owner of Ichiraku does file a complaint against them for interfering with his customers," she growled. She frowned at her student. "Hinata, you did nothing worse than standing up for your teammate. Activating your Byakugan, consciously or not, is not an offensive action by itself. Sakura did not look like she expected that, did she?"

Hinata slowly shook her head. "I don't understand why she can be so cruel to Naruto-kun," she said, the honorific barely whispered – but Kurenai's ears were sharp.

The jonin cleared her throat. "I think it's because she's a silly, shallow girl. She chases after Sasuke for the same reasons many of the other kunoichi do, and she cannot appreciate the subtle qualities of others."

"Subtle qualities?" her student asked.

"Most people see Naruto and dismiss him as a prankster or worse," Kurenai replied, skating around the edges of the Hokage's law. "You've told me yourself that you appreciate his cheerful nature and how he always keeps trying, no matter what. Those are actually very good qualities for a shinobi to have; it is wrong that you are the first person to notice this. Aside from Umino Iruka, I don't have a lot of respect for the teachers at the Konoha Ninja Academy."

Hinata's pale eyes widened at this admission. Kurenai knew she was laying it on a little thick, but Hinata's tendency to second-guess herself was holding her back. That vague sense of urgency she felt was also pushing her to become less circumspect in her dealings with the girl.

"Honestly," Kurenai continued, "I think you see Naruto better than many. And he needs people that understand him more than you know. Between you and me," she said, lowering her voice in a conspiratorial manner, "I think he needs friends as well as teammates. Would you like to be more than just his teammate?"

Kurenai phrased the last question innocently enough, and she suppressed a grin as Hinata's face immediately went bright red. Her suspicions confirmed, she looked up at the morning sky as her student collected herself. Hyuuga Hiashi might very well die of apoplexy if he knew what she'd just learned, but that was far too kind a fate for him. "I – I would like to be his friend," Hinata finally said.

"Good. I think you are making an excellent start," Kurenai said. "Just keep in mind that he hasn't had many people defend him over the years, so he may not understand why you do it." She didn't add that it was sad that this was the case, as sad as the fact that Hinata had no experience with being appreciated or complimented. Sometimes Kurenai felt like she was a medic-nin in a ward full of broken bodies… only what she was trying to repair here was harder to heal than mere flesh.

She was broken out of this reverie by Shino's arrival. The Aburame boy was as quiet and expressionless as ever, but Kurenai could

almost feel his attention shift back and forth between herself and Hinata.

"Hinata informed me about the altercation last night," she said.

Shino appeared to straighten slightly inside his long coat, but it might have been Kurenai's mind picking up subtler indications and filling in the blanks for her. "Our conduct was within the guidelines set forth for shinobi at the academy," he said, a little stiffly.

Kurenai nodded. "And I was about to compliment you both on your handling of the situation."

Shino nodded in turn, accepting her implied criticism of his defensiveness. "Will there be repercussions from this?" he asked.

"Only for them. Your conduct was above reproach, all of you, even Naruto. He left while being insulted, rather than retaliate. That speaks highly of his maturity, of all your maturity," Kurenai added. Then her expression hardened. "If there is an inquiry of any sort, I will deal with it, and make whoever raised it sorry to have done so."

Shino stood there for a moment, and Kurenai could almost hear the gears turning behind those dark glasses of his. Finally, he nodded again. Kurenai felt like the boy was still forming his own opinions of her as well as his teammates. She wasn't sure whether her last statement would move him positively or negatively, but she guessed the former to be the case. After all, logic would maintain that they had followed the Konoha Shinobi Code of Conduct to the letter, and logic was something Shino, like many Aburames, seem to inordinately prize.

"I would suggest," She said, "that we not mention this incident to Naruto unless he brings it up. They were his classmates and it was him that was being targeted, so it may not be a comfortable subject… but if you can bring this sort of cohesiveness to our field missions, they will become much easier to accomplish."

"What was that about missions?" Naruto asked as he landed in the middle of the clearing.

Kurenai felt her blood change to ice. Her student had discarded the uniform Ikitaro had spent so much effort altering the previous day. Instead, he was wearing a bright green leotard that bunched up in odd places on his small frame. The burnt umber leg warmers were there as well, with the toes of his sandals barely poking out of the fabric pooled around his ankles. Topping it off, his hair had been unevenly dyed black, so some of it was ebony, some bits were still blond, and gray-yellow streaks abounded. It had also been hewed, apparently with a dull kunai, into a crude approximation of a very distinctive bowl cut.

Gai had practically sworn not to do this. Naruto wasn't supposed to make major changes to his equipment without consulting her. She'd taken so damn many precautions, only to see… *this…* after only one training session. She didn't know how her kunai had gotten into her hand; all she knew was that it felt very, very right somehow. "I am going to kill Gai in his sleep," she snarled. "He promised me! No, I'm going to just sever his spinal cord and let him live as a quadriplegic!"

Naruto had taken a step back, as did her other startled genins. He seemed to be having some sort of difficulty moving, or was it breathing? Abruptly, he bent forward and his legs buckled. His rear end hit the ground and there was a loud pop and a puff of smoke. When it cleared, Naruto was lying curled up on the ground, in his new uniform, holding his stomach and laughing until tears began to leak from his eyes.

Kurenai stared at her student, realizing that she'd just been had. She'd been so shocked by Naruto's appearance that she hadn't even thought to check for a henge. He'd conned her, and quite skillfully under the circumstances. She tried to keep a straight face, but the corner of her mouth kept twitching as she stared at her genin.

Naruto sat up abruptly, as if he felt her eyes boring into him. He scratched at the back of his head and tried to stifle his laughter. "I

promised I wouldn't pull any more pranks in the village, but I didn't say I'd completely stop," he explained in a sheepish tone.

Kurenai gave it up as a lost cause and let out a bark of laughter, something that hadn't been heard in Konoha for many years. She saw her other genins' eyes widen as she laughed along with the blond-haired prankster. "Very good, Naruto. I hadn't extracted a completely binding promise from you, had I?" she asked rhetorically. "Now, do you know why your little joke worked so well?"

Naruto sat up straighter and frowned. Hinata had a faint smile on her face, no doubt from seeing Naruto fully recovered from the previous night. Shino was… well, Shino. Naruto shook his head.

Kurenai kneeled on the ground, getting comfortable and motioned for the others to do the same. "That was a very realistic henge, but normally, I can see through a henge a block away. I am a genjutsu specialist after all. But I didn't immediately think to check. Why was that?"

Naruto frowned, concentrating, but it was Shino who spoke up first. "You were clearly agitated by the apparent changes to his appearance. This obviously interfered with conducting logical thought processes."

Kurenai nodded. "That's part of the answer."

"From… from what you said earlier, about when you said I'd still be your student," Naruto said slowly, "You repeated that several times, but it didn't make sense until I'd seen Lee. Then I understood that if Gai made Lee dress like him, you might be afraid he'd do the same with me," he concluded, shuddering at the thought.

"Exactly. And if I was afraid it would happen, then I obviously considered it to be at least remotely possible, correct?" Kurenai asked.

Shino spoke up. "So he showed you something you at least partially expected to see, and made sure that it was sufficiently upsetting that you would react without thinking first?" he summarized.

"Exactly," Kurenai agreed. "Now, while this was a good prank, you can also apply those principles on missions, can't you?"

What followed was a rather stimulating discussion on using misdirection and knowledge of the enemy's emotional hot-buttons, both on the battlefield and to accomplish mission objectives. The latter was more applicable for a reconnaissance team, but all three of her genins contributed to the discussion. Hinata had evidently been paying attention in her classes, for she was able to effortlessly recall details from various famous missions they'd studied at the Academy. Naturally, Shino settled into a role as the critic for their various strategies, picking apart their plans and exposing every weakness.

Uzumaki Naruto was as creative as his… additions… to the Hokage Monument suggested. What was surprising was his ability to put together a plan almost instantly when presented with a situation and an objective. Kurenai slowly began to realize that Naruto's pranks had given him a thorough grounding in operational planning that many shinobi three times his age lacked.

For the most part, Kurenai would simply present them with a situation, then sit back and watch them hash it out. Sometimes it would take Naruto several attempts to come up with a plan that Shino would approve. Hinata stayed out of the discussions at first; she turned pink and looked down immediately after correcting Shino regarding the range of a Sand Country hunting boomerang. That interruption did not pass unnoticed by either boy, and soon they were working on drawing her into the planning sessions – usually by asking her specific questions.

By the end of the hour, her genins' heads appeared to be buzzing with all the new thoughts and ideas they'd assimilated. Despite herself, Kurenai was a little impressed by the way they'd worked

together on her hypothetical problems. She'd spent several hours last night looking up incidents that had occurred over the last seventy-five years, and memorizing enough details that she could relay it naturally and without anyone realizing they were being tested. She'd expected them to take a least three sessions to work through the fruits of her labors, not one.

Nonetheless, she smiled to herself as they began walking toward the Hokage's tower to receive a mission. It wasn't often that she misread people like that, and it was even rarer for her to be positively surprised. Her genin team was a bit more intelligent than she'd anticipated, and that was a good thing. She idly wondered why she'd been so resistant to taking on apprentices when her bitter memories supplied the answer.

Unbidden, she saw her students' forms overlaid with ghosts from the past. Hinata was replaced with a slender, red-eyed kunoichi with a far more aggressive attitude. Shino was replaced by the equally pragmatic, but even more hard-headed Nomaru. And Naruto… the village pariah was replaced by another young shinobi, also hated by some for something he had no control over… Mattai was there, his pale eyes in sharp contrast with his heavily tanned face and unruly black hair. The ghosts of her childhood walked before her, and Kurenai wondered if she looked into a mirror, would she see the imposing figure of Kobaru-sensei in place of her own.

It was a fortunate thing that a jonin must possess iron self-control. It was a blessing that the shinobi code would allow no trace of her anguish to show on her face. It was a curse that she would walk behind her team, letting them find their own paths, but always watching their backs and swearing to herself, *never again.* All of this as her mind relived those painful memories, along with bittersweet remembrances of a boy she once thought she might have loved.

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With creative use of Kage Bunshin, kikai bugs, and Hinata's all-seeing eyes, Naruto and his teammates began regularly clearing out two "D" ranked missions every afternoon. As long as they finished

their first mission quickly, the Hokage was happy to oblige them when they returned to the tower. Kurenai-sensei was also correct about how the money would accumulate from doubling up on missions. Naruto soon paid Ikitaro the tailor another visit, and ordered a duplicate uniform made to the same specifications. It would be nice not having to do laundry *every* night to keep from stinking. He even thought about buying a small washing machine.

Such thoughts were especially attractive since he got pretty dirty every morning. If anything, the pace of the workouts with Lee and Gai-sensei grew even more intense. Naruto was frustrated that he couldn't build up calluses and scar tissue on his knuckles like Lee could. He tried to hit the training logs just as hard as his rival, and he always finished with bloody knuckles, but after they healed the skin refused to harden up. Eventually he gave up and just wore his fingerless gloves, trying to do as much damage as possible to the thick wood.

Under Gai-sensei's careful guidance, Naruto's taijutsu form slowly improved. Now he found himself rarely losing his footing when sparring with Lee, and almost never against Shino or Hinata. Speed, however, was still a sore point with Naruto. No matter what he tried, he couldn't ever seem to match Rock Lee in that department. Gai assigned him to wear some leg weights, and Naruto obeyed – though he attached twice as many as he was instructed to. He was so frustrated that he wanted to get better as rapidly as possible. Of course, the first time he tried to leap onto a roof-top after doing this, he ran face-first into a wall.

Kurenai-sensei pulled him aside after he showed up for a team meeting barely able to walk. That was when she explained why it was better to gradually increase the weights, so he could get used to them. A sudden increase in his burden would merely keep him from moving as freely, which would be counter-productive in the long run. Sure enough, once he reduced his load and began moving a little more freely, the increases in speed and strength sped up as well.

Nonetheless, his morning sparring sessions with Lee consisted of the other boy running rings around him at first, until eventually Naruto could tire him out and get the fight onto a more even footing. It was humbling to realize that if they ever fought for real, his only hope would be to fight totally defensively and hope Lee didn't strike a decisive blow before he could wear the spandex-clad ninja down. Of course, that knowledge, galling as it was, only spurred Naruto to work harder, and increase his weights whenever he began to move a little easier.

Against Shino, Naruto's efforts were a little more gratifying. The larger boy still had reach on him, but Naruto's corrected stances were stable enough that he could block his teammate's attacks without falling or being shoved off balance. The weights made it harder to block fast enough, but the increased mass was gratifying when he snapped his forearm around properly and knocked Shino's arm completely out of line. The bug-user's eyebrows rose above the tops of his dark glasses as Naruto spun inside his guard and lightly slapped his stomach with a textbook perfect reverse punch. Not a word was exchanged as they slid back into ready positions for the next round, but the nod Shino gave him was oddly respectful – more like a subtle bow – and Naruto responded with a tight grin… though he really wanted to shout out loud.

Naruto was also secretly glad that he had not run into certain other people as well. They'd heard through the rumor mill that Team 7 had been given a C-rank mission after Kiba pitched a fit about being asked to catch the cat belonging to the Fire Lord's wife for the third time. Now, Kiba, Sasuke, and Sakura were out of town for an unspecified period of time, escorting some bridge-builder. Naruto really wouldn't miss Sasuke, or even Kiba. Sakura… it was weird, how he'd still get that light feeling when he saw her… no matter how nasty she'd been to him the last time. That light feeling would last until she said something, or until she started fawning on Sasuke, or do something else to remind him of exactly how much she didn't care for him. He didn't understand how he could want to see her, but still hate how she made him feel afterward. Maybe he deserved it in

some way, so it was only right that it would happen like that. Of course, now it wouldn't happen for a while now – all over a tantrum about a mission to retrieve a cat.

Naruto didn't understand what the big deal about that cat was. Of course, after the first time they'd caught it, Shino left one of his smaller bugs concealed under its collar. He and members of his personal colony can apparently smell each other from blocks away, so after that it took maybe half an hour to narrow down the errant feline's location. Naruto's presence was usually enough to flush the pampered pet, who seemed unusually agitated whenever he was around. On the other hand, it would usually run straight to Hinata and beg to be picked up. The white-eyed girl would oblige, and stroke the fur around its ears while they returned it. Naruto thought it was kind of funny how easily the finicky cat took to his teammate, but when he asked Hinata if she had any pets, she just looked down and became extremely quiet. He wanted to ask Kurenai if she knew what was going on, but when he caught her eye she was frowning as well.

Uzumaki Naruto wasn't the most observant shinobi in the leaf, but he wasn't stupid. Well, not completely stupid anyway. His white-eyed teammate wasn't just quiet. At times, something would seem to set her off and she'd just seem to disappear, shrinking in on herself and refusing to make a sound. Try as he might, he couldn't see any pattern to when this happened. He remembered when he tried to compliment her in the herbalist's garden, and how she pretty much refused to talk to him after that. Yet that same evening, she'd reportedly gone off on Sakura for saying something nasty about him. It just didn't make any sense. Even for a girl.

Of course, that meant he had no idea what to do. He knew his own issues with that damned fox sealed behind his navel tended to make him react oddly at times, but no one bound a demon to Hinata, so he had no idea what was wrong. It was very confusing so he tried to not make a big deal out of it. He just wished he knew what Kurenai-sensei was being so close-mouthed about.

After completing their thirtieth mission, yet another cat retrieval, Kurenai-sensei did not lead them back to the Hokage's tower for another mission. "You three have been working very hard, and I'm quite pleased with your progress, so we will take a break this afternoon and relax," she said with a smile.

With that, she led them through the village to a cluster of buildings that looked vaguely familiar to Naruto. But it wasn't until the sign became visible that he realized she was taking them to Moritake's.

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Kurenai smiled as she led her team into her favorite restaurant. They'd been working hard the past two weeks, between missions, sparring, group lessons, and their individual training. She could see from the effects it had on their performance than none of them had been slacking on the latter. At the same time, she became concerned she might be pushing too hard, and risking burn-out of some sort.

That was the excuse Asuma used when she asked him about the training regimen he used with his team. Mostly it seemed to consist of him playing Go with the Nara kid, while the other two looked bored. Or the four of them eating at Asuma's favorite yakitori place. He seemed to think that just putting a Nara, Akimichi, and Yamanaka together on one team was enough to ensure success. Kurenai knew better: success and survival were never to be taken for granted.

Moritake himself looked up from the bar as they walked in. "Kurenai, Naruto, come in, come in. This must be the rest of your team?"

Kurenai smiled and introduced Shino and Hinata to the retired shinobi-turned-restaurant owner. Soon they were seated at a table in the corner, where a waitress took their orders.

Shino looked from her to Naruto and back again before speaking. "Logically, this would be an establishment that you are familiar with. But how did he know Naruto?"

Kurenai resisted the urge to grimace. You couldn't train kids to look 'underneath the underneath' for years and not expect them to do so at inconvenient times. "After our first team meeting, I took Naruto here to discuss some issues that had come up."

"I see," Shino said in a neutral tone, then took a sip of his tea.

Kurenai's eyes cut over to Naruto, who was looking a little uncomfortable. Hinata just stared down as if studying her plate. "No, I'm not sure you do," she said in a reasonable tone. "Naruto doesn't like to make a big deal of it, but I don't think you are aware of the extent of the supplemental training he has taken on."

Naruto's face reddened a little, but now Hinata was looking up, evidently interested in the direction the conversation had taken. Shino just gazed at his sensei, his facial features settled into his neutral mask. Shino refused to show any overt emotion, but she was fairly sure the bug-user was bothered by a seeming favoritism on her part toward his teammate. He seemed to respect logic, so she would lay her cards on the table in a logical fashion.

"We came here to discuss his role within the team, and the measures that would be necessary for him to fill it. He agreed to replace his uniform, at his own cost, for something better suited to our probable mission profiles. He is also undergoing the most comprehensive training program out of the three of you. Every morning, he gets up at five and meets with Maito Gai and his student for taijutsu training from six until nine. Then he meets with us for team training at ten. Between training and missions, we are usually together until five or six in the afternoon. After that, he stays at training area nineteen and practices alone with his jutsus and chakra control exercises. What time do you go home each night, Naruto? Be honest."

"I usually quit and go to Ichiraku's around nine or so," he answered in a low voice.

"What have I told you about eating Ramen too often?" Kurenai chided him with a smile. Naruto acted embarrassed, but that only made her point for her. "Anyway, I was asking him to basically commit to working fifteen hour days, so I needed to ask about several things, including his willingness to work such a schedule."

Shino nodded slowly. "I admit I was curious as to the true extent of his extra training. He purposefully made light of it when we discussed it earlier. I… given Naruto's improvements, I would probably also benefit from extra taijutsu training, but I currently spend most of my mornings and evenings working on the kikai colonies at home." Kurenai was sure there was a regretful note in the boy's usual monotone.

"I understand that," Kurenai agreed. "Your family's unique abilities are based on your affinities with the colonies you host. Your father made me aware that they were entering a delicate phase in their breeding program. I'm sure the long term benefits will more than make up for any delays in your training."

Shino nodded again but didn't speak. Kurenai tried not to let any relief show on her face. The last thing she needed was any jealousy or perceived favoritism poisoning the atmosphere between her genins. The problem with Shino was that he didn't give her a lot of information to work with. He was normally so restrained and emotionless that the normal warning signs were usually absent. But as Kobaru-sensei once said, 'still waters often run the deepest', and it was a mistake to assume the boy behind the emotionless shinobi mask was without feelings of his own.

Kurenai's musings were interrupted by a hesitant voice. "A-ano," Hinata said. "I would like to take extra training, if I can. I know I have a lot that I need to work on, and I need a lot of extra effort to be as good as… as good as I need to be."

Kurenai considered the girl for a moment. While she damned Hiashi for systematically destroying the girl's sense of worth, his actions seem to have given her motivation to work harder, rather than just

giving up. It was too bad her father was too stupid to see her stubborn determination and acknowledge it for what it was. "I appreciate your desire to improve, Hinata, but I don't think the morning sessions with Gai would be much help to you. They are working on standard taijutsu forms, not Jyuuken. The styles are so different that you would be re-learning everything from step one. I also hate to mention this, but I think your father would have strong objections to you learning another style, at least for now."

Kurenai considered her next words as she watched the girl's face fall. She supposed Hinata couldn't help but take it as a rejection – everything in her world was probably rooted in the rejections from her remaining parent. Even if she understood it, Kurenai still found it painful to watch. "On the other hand, I think you should work on your individual exercises in the morning. After our team meetings are over, you can always stay late and work with Naruto."

If someone had suddenly whisked Hyuuga Hinata away, and left an alabaster statue sitting in her place, Kurenai doubted it would have looked much different.

Kurenai turned toward Naruto, who looked a little surprised. "You two are about the same size, so you make good sparring partners, at least for right now. You can show her some of the things you are learning from Gai. Hinata also has excellent chakra control, and that's one of your weaknesses. I think both of you can benefit from working together. Do either of you have any objections?" She asked innocently. She felt slightly guilty for putting them on the spot like this, but the better she got to know the two of them, the more she felt a stronger friendship between them would do them both good. Hinata needed to absorb some of Naruto's confidence, and Naruto needed acceptance. He was still afraid to tell anyone who didn't already know about his prisoner. Kurenai felt, given her reactions, that Hinata was the least likely person to reject him if she found out.

Still, it was a calculated risk. She didn't know what Naruto would do if he did finally trust someone, only to be betrayed. The worst case scenario was, well, disastrous. Not that it would be anything worse

than this village seemed to deserve, claimed a traitorous thought welling up from the bitterness of her past. She dismissed that sentiment as unworthy of her, and unworthy of the memories of those lost. She looked from Naruto to Hinata and back again. If she was wrong, the village would live or die on the merits of its youngest generation, and perhaps that was as it should be. Wars were usually decided in a similar manner, weren't they? "Do either of you object to working together?" she asked archly.

"N-no," Naruto said quickly. Kurenai remembered how upset he'd been after Hinata reacted so strongly to his compliment at the herbalist's house. He was still fearful of upsetting her again, which wasn't really a bad thing. Hinata had few enough people in her life who were considerate of her feelings.

Of course, that could be used both ways. "Hinata, I understand if your father would not approve. If you don't think you can do this, Naruto understands," Kurenai said. "It's not like you'll hurt his feelings," she added innocently.

Naruto nodded calmly, but Hinata's face took on a trapped expression. "I-I will be happy to train with Naruto!" She stammered quickly, confirming Kurenai's assessment. As nervous as she was, Hinata was more afraid of giving offense, or doing something that could be seen as hurtful to Naruto. "Good, it's settled. You two can start tomorrow. If your father has any questions, Hinata, please tell him to direct them to me. But let's not go borrowing trouble, all right?"

Hinata nodded. Kurenai doubted Hyuuga Hiashi would even notice unless someone brought it to his attention. He was evidently very involved in training the girl's younger sister, Hanabi. There was already buzz around the jonin ranks about another possible Hyuuga genius being considered for an early admission to the Konoha Ninja Academy. Even if he did object, custom mandated that, even as Kurenai was powerless to interfere in his daughter's home life, Hiashi was similarly powerless to interfere with her genin's training regimen.

The next day, Team 8 performed no missions at all. Instead, they were joined by two newcomers to training area nineteen. Kurenai watched Naruto lead Rock Lee and a brown-haired girl into the clearing to join them.

Tenten was a pretty genin, a year older than Kurenai's students, with her long hair done up in an elaborate double-bun that kept it up and out of her way. As they entered the clearing, she was twirling a kunai and telling Naruto about a sword her father was designing. When they saw Kurenai, Tenten and Lee immediately moved to stand before her and bow.

"Thank you for allowing us to attend this training session," Tenten said in a respectful voice as she straightened up. Lee didn't say anything, but nodded vigorously.

Kurenai blinked, a little disconcerted by their extreme politeness. "That's all right, I'm happy to have you here. Naruto has improved so much working with Lee and your sensei."

Tenten nodded. "He's really sped up. Gai-sensei has me come by every so often for target practice, and I can barely hit him now."

"Target practice?" Kurenai asked curiously.

"Hai," Lee said abruptly. "It's to test our reflexes. Naruto-san and I are the targets and Tenten-san practices."

Kurenai blinked.

"Blunted kunais," Tenten said quickly. "They don't draw blood. Well, not much anyway."

"I don't let her hit me in the face anymore," Naruto said innocently.

"I… see," Kurenai said in a distant voice. "Well, let's get started." She motioned for them to sit. "A genjutsu is a construct, composed

of chakra, designed to deceive the senses…"

As she began with the standard academy introduction, Kurenai considered her audience. Shino was as impassive as ever, but she got a sense that his attention was unusually focused today, whether by the visitors, or by the subject matter was debatable. Hinata hadn't said a word since the newcomers arrived. Her Byakugan could see through most genjutsus because the chakra would be directly visible to her. But she still paid close attention to the lecture. Kurenai wondered if she was aware of the small number of advanced techniques that could deceive the Hyuuga bloodline, if she expected her eyes to fail her when it counted most, or if she was just being polite. Naruto was mostly focused on her words, though he did fidget a little as she talked. For someone as energetic as the blond shinobi, that was almost inevitable.

In addition to being excruciatingly polite, Gai's students were most attentive.

Lee frowned a lot as she talked. She wondered if he was having difficulty following the material, since he probably hadn't studied genjutsus much since discovering he couldn't mold the chakra necessary to create one.

Tenten, on the other hand, was almost starry-eyed. It took a while for Kurenai to understand why she had such an awed expression on her face. From what she'd heard, the girl was one of the more formidable new kunoichis, deadly accurate with thrown weapons, and no slouch with melee weapons either. Still, she was on a team with a male jonin and two boys, one of whom was the Hyuuga prodigy. It was likely that she'd questioned, at least once or twice, if a woman could be a successful ninja and advance to the jonin rank. Girls were a noticeable minority at the academy, and the disparity only became more pronounced at the higher ranks. Kurenai realized, with an uncomfortable lurch, that the girl probably idolized her for her apparent success.

Yuuhi Kurenai's multi-tasking capabilities were put to the test as she sorted out her feelings and concluded the textbook explanation of her art. While she had made the rank of jonin, she didn't consider herself any sort of success, let alone a role model. She'd simply had the dumb luck to survive a situation that killed her betters, and then been unable to find conclusive evidence as to why it had happened. Not that *she* needed it. She knew why it happened. But the Hokage couldn't act without proof, and for something like this… she'd need unassailable proof, because the villagers wouldn't want to believe it, wouldn't want to act.

And so he got away with it. And she was left to pick up the pieces of her life. To find another team, but never get close to them. To pass the rank exams, but never feel successful after that one awful failure. Part of her wanted to pull that starry-eyed girl off to the side and scream into her ear. Tell her to stop looking to the future and to look around instead. Tell her to cherish her teammates and her friends, because they could all be taken away in the blink of an eye. But she couldn't do that. She'd frighten the girl, and she'd probably talk. Word might get around… and the one who did this to her, the one responsible for so much. He would know, and it might please him to know how deeply he'd scarred her.

She'd rather die first.

Instead she wrapped up her description of the theory. "Are there any questions?" she asked. When no one moved, she continued. "Now, as for identifying when you are being affected by a genjutsu, remember it is limited by two things: the amount of chakra used, and the creator's imagination. Both of those factors mean that not every element of the illusion will be perfect. There's only a finite amount of chakra that can be used to create the sensory overlay, and it can't include anything the creator didn't think of. That means if you act or focus on things the creator didn't anticipate, you are more likely to notice discrepancies. Once your mind seizes on these differences, the battle is mostly won. You aren't fooled any more, and now all you need to do is push back the curtain that has been drawn before you."

Noting the nodding heads before her, Kurenai posed a question. "One commonly known method of disrupting a genjutsu is to wound yourself – the sudden pain can shock the senses and disrupt the overlay. But this is hardly an elegant solution, as someone in a dangerous situation hardly needs to be mutilating themselves. How else do you think this can be accomplished?"

Shino spoke up first. "Logically, if it is a chakra-based energy construct, the genjutsu can be disrupted by the application of a similar form of energy."

"That is correct," Kurenai agreed, "but we're getting ahead of ourselves. What is an easier way to free oneself from such a construct?"

Lee and Naruto looked puzzled, and Tenten frowned. Surprisingly, Hinata hesitantly raised her hand. "A-ano… if the construct is anchored to your personal chakra, would it be easier to just disrupt the anchors, rather than the whole thing?"

"That's very close," Kurenai agreed. "You can temporarily remove what the genjutsu is anchored to. It's tricky if you don't have good chakra control, but if you can suppress your own chakra circulation for a split second, the genjutsu will instantly fall away from you. This is a lot easier than trying to shatter a chakra construct that might have been made by someone considerably more powerful than you are.

With that, she demonstrated the seals, and with a sharp intake of breath, suppressed her chakra circulation to zero. Instantly, the sunlight dimmed, the sound of birdsong became fainter, and the feel of the warm sun on her face was muted. She blew out the breath, released her chakra, and everything quickly went back to normal.

She had each of them practice by themselves, then with her standing next to them, maintaining a blindness genjutsu on them. Hinata and, surprisingly, Lee picked it up immediately. After figuring

out what they were doing wrong, Shino and Tenten soon mastered the technique.

Unfortunately, Naruto was never able to completely suppress his chakra. Kurenai suspected the Yondaime's seal and/or his tenant was the reason, but she couldn't discuss it in front of others. She had to settle for a sympathetic look as Naruto grumbled and sulked.

"K-Kurenai-sensei?" Hinata asked, glancing at Naruto. "Is there a way to remove a genjutsu from another person?" Kurenai did not miss the look she sent Naruto's way, but the boy was too busy sulking to pay attention just yet.

"Well… there is, but it's a little trickier," Kurenai agreed. "Shino hit upon the principle earlier. You have to disrupt the chakra in the genjutsu itself. The easiest way to do this is to draw in your chakra and push it down toward your hara, right below your navel. You collect as much as you can, and compress it into as tight a sphere as possible. Visualize it like a ball being squeezed and compressed from every direction. Once you have it packed as tightly as possible, release it all at once."

"W-won't that, er, hurt?" Hinata asked nervously.

"Not really," Kurenai assured her. "One, it is very difficult to gather a lot of energy that way. Also, it's still *your* chakra. It's attuned to your body, and until it's aspected by a jutsu, it will just pass through your cells without damaging them."

"I can see how that might push away a genjutsu anchored to me, but how will that help someone else?" Tenten asked curiously.

"Another very good question," Kurenai acknowledged with a nod. "When the chakra leaves your body, it will form a pulse, almost like a shockwave, that will extend a small distance, based upon how much chakra is used. That pulse can also disrupt any genjutsu it encounters. However, it's difficult to generate enough power to make the pulse extend any great distance. Thus, you may have to be very

close to the person you are trying to free," she concluded, ignoring the blush that suddenly spread across Hinata's face.

With that, Kurenai had them practice the harder method. Unsurprisingly, Lee could not perform this method at all. Tenten could do it, but the pulse only extended a few inches from her skin. Hinata concentrated for several moments, then released a chakra pulse that extended over two feet from her body, after which she fell to her knees, gasping for breath.

Yuuhi Kurenai didn't often think about the Kyuubi. It was locked away, sealed inside Naruto. It gave him unnatural stamina and the hatred of the villagers, but it didn't control his mind or his soul. She was far more concerned with her student as a person than as a strategic asset. So it could be understood how she overlooked the effects her instructions would have on the vessel that contained the nine-tailed fox.

It wasn't until the frustrated genin began to concentrate and an actually visible haze of blue chakra appeared around him, tinted purple at the edges, that the implications sank in. Kurenai opened her mouth to tell him to stop when he released the chakra pulse.

She instinctively threw up her hands as the energy washed over her. Her skin tingled and all the hairs on the back of her neck stood at attention, but there were no truly adverse effects. The air was filled with sound as the trees around them emptied of birds. Turning and looking across the clearing, Kurenai could see flocks of birds taking wing in the distance… and the faint shimmer in the air meant the pulse was still traveling.

She turned back around and saw everyone staring at Naruto. Tenten's mouth was hanging open, but Lee was giving him a v-for-victory sign. Shino's eyebrows were clearly visible above his sunglasses. Hinata's Byakugan were activated, and the expression on her face bordered on awe. Naruto gave his sensei a sheepish grin and shrugged as he scratched the back of his head.

Kurenai sighed. "I suppose if you aren't good at chakra *suppression* , you'd make up for it with chakra *expression* . We should try to finish this lesson before the ANBU get here to find out what happened."

The Hokage was more amused than anything else once he learned the full story that evening. Kurenai was mortified when she discovered how large an area Naruto had effected. Nearly a quarter of the village had felt the chakra pulse. It hadn't hurt anyone or damaged anything… as long as you didn't count the dignity of the wives of a few village elders. Kurenai was secretly annoyed at the frivolous uses some made of her art, so having one's cosmetic illusions stripped away suddenly, seemed a just comeuppance.

Fortunately, no one would learn of Naruto's involvement in their less than private humiliations. All they would know was that a test involving an experimental jutsu had gone awry, affecting a large area.

To his credit, once she reported the basic facts, the Hokage was more interested in Naruto's development.

"I suppose it's best," he concluded, "that if he can't use one method to break a genjutsu, then the alternative would work even better for him."

"I'd say a bit more than better," Kurenai disagreed in a respectful voice, "I *felt* that pulse. He could disrupt every genjutsu user in a battle with one technique."

"Ours as well as theirs," the Hokage gently reminded her.

"We can work out a signal so friendly forces would know to expect it. I'm just wondering what else he can learn to do," Kurenai said. She sighed. "So much time wasted at the academy, being ignored. But he's determined to make up for lost time now."

"How is he doing… aside from his studies?" the Hokage asked.

"Better," Kurenai said after a moment's thought. "He seems to have struck up a friendly rivalry with Gai's student Rock Lee. They spar for hours every morning, so it's not unexpected. He and Shino get along, though it's sometimes hard to tell with the Aburame boy. He's as quiet and close-mouthed as any of his family. As for Hinata…" her voice trailed off. "I think she may suspect his secret now. She's far more intelligent than anyone gives her credit for, and those eyes… she had them activated and was staring at him after he released that pulse. I think she suspects something."

The Hokage frowned. "That is worrisome. I suppose we could arrange to have her moved…"

"On the contrary," Kurenai said quickly. "I think it's the best thing that could happen."

The Hokage stared at Kurenai for so long that she began to feel a little nervous. But she couldn't let him do anything to disrupt what she'd spent so long building towards. "I'm not sure I understand your reasoning," he finally said.

"Naruto has been isolated all of his life. He's been alone as long as he can remember, and now, thanks to Mizuki, he knows why. You and I can tell him it's not his fault until we're blue in the face, but it won't matter if everyone else who knows treats him like a monster. With all due respect, Hokage-sama, right now your law is slowly killing him. No one his age knows the truth, and he feels like once he tells them, they will turn on him like their parents have. All the burdens are on him, and right now he's so overloaded he can't even take the first step. He's gladly working fifteen hour days because it gives him something else to think about, gives him something he actually has control over."

Kurenai looked over at her superior. His eyes were squeezed shut like he was in pain, and his face had a peculiar grayish tinge to it. His pipe sat forgotten and extinguished near the corner of his desk. Kurenai felt a sudden stab of pity for the old man, but she knew she had to make her point before he did something to ruin things. "To

break him out of this destructive cycle of belief," she continued, "three things have to happen. First, someone of his generation has to figure out what happened. With your law in effect, that's a tricky proposition. Second, they have to confront Naruto and let him know they know something's wrong. Finally, they have to accept him as he is."

"And you believe this Hyuuga girl can do this?" the Hokage whispered.

Kurenai nodded. "I believe she's our best chance. She's intelligent, well-read, and… well, she likes the boy. She was mortified yesterday at the thought of something she said hurting his feelings. She's also volunteered for extra training with Naruto – they're probably sparring as we speak."

The Hokage nodded, though his eyes were still troubled. "So much was done with the best of intentions, yet we only end up hurting the boy worse." He sighed. "When he learns the whole truth, I doubt he will ever forgive me."

Kurenai had never seen her Hokage look so… defeated before. "I think…" she began, but her voice trailed off. "I think he is more forgiving than we believe. Times were chaotic back then, and you chose the best course you could. He will understand that."

"Would you in his place?" The Hokage asked.

The question caught Kurenai off balance. She realized that her smoldering resentment of his reluctance to pursue a dangerous investigation had been apparent all along. She felt shamed, a little, by that. "Perhaps," she said, realizing it was more true than she first thought, "but I think he is more forgiving than I. After all he has been through, he still wishes to become Hokage – knowing what the job entails."

The old man seemed to gather himself and leaned back slightly in his chair. "That is one of the more amazing things about the boy.

While you are probably correct about his nature, I still need to find some way of making amends. I will leave it to you, Kurenai. I only hope you are correct in your assessment."

Kurenai inclined her head respectfully toward her leader, a man she revered even more now than she did before. "I hope I am right as well, I do not see any other way for this to end well."

After the genjutsu seminar, Hinata stayed in training area nineteen with Naruto. Her father hadn't expressed any concern when she informed him she would be doing extra training in the evening. Honesty required Hinata to admit that there were places she would rather spend time at than home – and this was one of them. Her training partner immediately sprang to his feet and began making an extremely exaggerated series of stretches. Grimacing comically, he grunted and groaned as Hinata suppressed a smile. His habit of trying to do everything in as funny a manner as possible was also one of the things she admired about him. He always wanted those around him to be smiling and laughing. She knew she had far too little of either of those things in her life.

She must have let a little of her smile show as she rose to her feet, because Naruto stuck his lower lip out in an exaggerated pout. "Hey!" he exclaimed, "it's not funny. I don't think I've ever sat in one position that long in my life!" Abruptly his face fell. "And then when I do finally get to do something, I can't make that chakra-interrupt-jutsu-thing work right."

"But you were able to do the other method," she reminded him gently.

"Yeah, that's right!" he agreed, brightening. "It seems like I can do that chakra pulse thing fairly well."

Hinata found herself nodding agreement without saying a word. The truth was that he'd done quite a bit better than 'fairly well'. She activated her Byakugan just before he released the pulse, something she never casually did when she was looking at the boy. She didn't

want anyone to get the wrong idea, especially after Ino had asked her some very embarrassing questions about Sasuke after school one day,

But the chakra spike she felt was so strong, too powerful to be coming from the genin before her, no matter how hard he tried. It didn't seem possible, so she activated her Byakugan to search for the real source… and found Naruto, shimmering with gathered chakra, swirling in complex patterns around his navel as he concentrated. She'd never seen anyone gather that much chakra before, including her father. When Naruto released the pulse, he glowed within her special vision and then his aura exploded outward. The only thing she could think of when she saw it was the old tales of Susano, stepping out of a thunderbolt as it struck the ground.

Then the shockwave passed and Naruto was still standing there, looking a little embarrassed while everyone stared at him.

And now she was training with him.

When Naruto finished stretching and grunting he looked over at Hinata. "What do you think we should work on first?"

Hinata could barely force words out of her tightening throat. "A-ano… whatever you think we should do is fine," she squeaked out.

Naruto frowned and she wondered what she'd said wrong. "Er, I don't really know what we should work on first. Do you have any suggestions?"

Hinata swallowed. She was uncomfortable, but she was also bolstered by the thought that Naruto didn't seem to be knowingly putting her on the spot. "K-kurenai-sensei said that each of us has things t-to learn from the other," she said.

Naruto nodded thoughtfully. "All right, what did you want to work on?"

"Well," she replied, "she did mention I could work on my sparring with you, since we are roughly the same size."

"Okay," Naruto said, brightening, "that sounds like fun."

"Ano, Naruto, what did you want to work on?" Hinata asked in turn. It was funny how it got easier to talk to him once she got started. Thinking about it, she realized it was because he never lost patience with her or anyone else. He'd even stop to talk to younger students who still attended the academy, like Konohamaru, if they ran into him and his friends while they were working. It was yet another thing she admired about him, especially when she was dealing with other, less patient people.

Naruto scowled for a moment and Hinata thought she'd offended him before she realized that was just his 'thinking' expression. Evidently he found it painful. "Well," he said slowly, "I normally work on my chakra and my jutsus in the evenings. I don't get much chance to do them during the day, except when Kurenai-sensei works on them with us. Lee can't do ninjutsus, so we just practice taijutsu."

"Kurenai-sensei gave me some special exercises to work on my chakra control. Would you like to work on those as well?" she suggested.

Naruto nodded slowly. "I think that would be a good idea. Sensei says my chakra control sucks." He paused as Hinata stared at him, "Er, actually she said it was 'one of my weaknesses, and I need to fix those as much as possible'."

Hinata reflected that at least he had some strengths, instead of being all weaknesses like her. Their sparring only confirmed this. Naruto had improved so much working with Gai-sensei and Lee that she could barely touch him now. He was so fast…

When they paused for a moment, Hinata asked between pauses for breath how he'd become so quick on his feet. Naruto nodded like he'd just remembered something and pulled up his pant leg.

Strapped to his lower calf and ankle was a padded bracer studded with metal ovals. Hinata's stomach dropped as she realized he was beating her even while he was burdened with extra weight. "I took some of the slugs off before I came here," Naruto told her, oblivious to her mortification, "because I wanted to give you a good fight. But training with these on my legs and a smaller pair on my forearms really helped me improve. I bet Kurenai-sensei knows where we can get you a pair. The cool thing is that they have a quick-release latch that makes them just fall off of you. That way if you get ambushed you can ditch them quickly."

Naruto slid his pant leg back down and straightened up. "I tried that once, just to see what a difference it makes… I felt like I was flying at first. That'll give people a real surprise, won't it? Er… what's wrong?" he asked.

Hinata was trying valiantly to maintain the cool composure her father demanded of her… but standing as close as Naruto-kun was, it was impossible to hide so much from him. Trying to control her quavering voice, she asked "D-do you think they would help me that much?"

Naruto frowned. "Of course it should. I remember you kicking my butt that first day we sparred."

Hinata felt even more embarrassed now. He obviously remembered their sparring and resented her showing him up. "G-gomen," she said quietly.

"Nani?" Naruto asked, his face a portrait of confusion. "Why are you apologizing for being a good sparring partner?" he asked. "Lee kicks my butt almost every day, and I learn a lot from it. Now my job is to kick your butt so you can learn from it. See how it works out?"

Hinata privately wondered how much her rear end would hurt when this was over, but she only said "Hai!" in response.

They sparred for another hour before Naruto called a halt. He was flushed, but Hinata was trembling and pouring sweat. She knew she

looked a mess, but she'd rather sweat like a pig than let Naruto think she was unwilling to work hard. Ino and Sakura would be mortified to be seen in such a state, but didn't Naruto-kun suggest, in a roundabout way, that he liked Hinata better because she wasn't like them? "That was really good Hinata," he said, "Once you got warmed up you kept up with me… and if you'd been using your Jyuuken, I'd have been in real trouble!"

Hinata knew he was exaggerating to be nice, but his words still buoyed her. "Thank you, Naruto. We should probably work with chakra control now. What specifically are you having problems with?"

"Everything," he replied, rolling his eyes.

Hinata did not react to his joke, but merely waited patiently for Naruto to continue. Finally, he sighed. "All right," he said. "I know from things Shino said that you and he are working on some kind of chakra-based tree-climbing exercise. I'm still having trouble with the basic water-walking Kurenai-sensei showed us nearly two weeks ago."

After they began, Hinata's normal reticence was countered by Naruto's obvious chagrin. She didn't understand how a boy who'd created such an incredibly powerful chakra pulse that afternoon had such difficulty pushing a constant level of chakra out of the bottom of his feet. Nonetheless, that was exactly his problem. The chakra in his feet would vary widely until it destabilized his support and let his feet fall through the surface of the pond. Fortunately, he would do this barely more than a step from the bank, so only his feet got wet.

Hinata watched him concentrate, and turned her Byakugan on so she could study the chakra flow through the coils in his legs. The delicate blue tracery was visible at this range, which pleased Hinata. Her eyes weren't as well developed as those of, say, her cousin Neji, and she sometimes had difficulty seeing another person's coils in any detail. After a moment, she began to make out more of the details as Naruto repeatedly dunked his feet.

One reason she was able to see the coils was simply size. Naruto had some of the thickest chakra coils she had ever seen on a human being, let alone a genin. However, with coils that thick, he should have no difficulty supporting himself on the surface of the water. But as she watched, she noticed bits of red chakra mixed in with the pure blue. When they reached his feet, they would surge in irregular ways. Sometimes the red chakra would cancel out the blue chakra, leaving that foot dangerously under-supported. Other times the red chakra seemed to reinforce the blue chakra, and that foot would start to raise up a little bit, unbalancing her teammate.

"Ano… Naruto, I have never seen someone with two types of chakra before. Why is that?" No sooner had the words left her mouth than Hinata knew something was wrong. Naruto went very still as his feet sank into the water. He wasn't even trying to support himself now.

"You're… looking? At my feet?" he asked her.

"Gomen," Hinata apologized quickly. "I thought, if I could see what you were doing with your chakra, I could help you more."

She could almost hear as well as see Naruto swallow. "I see," he said.

She dug her fingers into the crest of the bank. What was so wrong that Naruto was reacting like this? What had she done? She took a shallow breath and tried to steady her voice. "If you can keep the red chakra out of there, it'll probably work better," she suggested timidly.

Naruto frowned. "And how do I… wait… Hinata, tell me when you see any bits of the red stuff, all right?"

Hinata nodded and Naruto climbed onto the bank, concentrated for a moment, and then stepped out onto the surface of the water again. He held steady for a moment, until Hinata saw a mote of red light winding past his knee. "Naruto, I see one, traveling down your right leg. It just passed the knee, and now it's…

Naruto's face held a fierce grimace as he stood there with his eyes shut and his hands fisted at his sides. Hinata saw the blue chakra swirling faster down his right leg, and suddenly the red chakra was expelled, along with several bits of blue chakra, from one of the Tenketsu points on his calf.

"You did it, Naruto-kun!" Hinata said, unable to keep the excitement out of her voice.

"G-good," Naruto said, panting, "tell me if you see another one."

"Hai!" Hinata agreed. After a moment she spoke again. "I see one in the other leg, still moving down the front of your thigh."

"I think I can feel that one," Naruto said as he concentrated. After a moment, that too was expelled. "Did that get it?" he asked.

"Hai, Naruto," Hinata said in an excited voice. "That was even faster."

"Good," he replied with his eyes still shut. "I'm going to see if I can sense the next one myself."

Sure enough, a large fragment of red appeared, moving quickly down his right leg. "Right?" he asked her.

"Yes it is," she breathed. Naruto had been standing on the water for nearly two minutes now. A moment later, a red spark escaped from the Tenketsu point on his knee.

Slowly Naruto stepped back onto the bank and sank onto his haunches. "Well, it looks like you were right, Hinata. That's the longest I've been able to stand on the water before." He let out a shaky breath. "That was harder than I thought it would be. I'm about beat. Do you mind if we break for the night? I need to get something to eat before Ichiraku's closes."

Hinata stood up, wiping the fragments of grass from her fingers. "Ano, Naruto, I thought Kurenai-sensei said you eat there too often?"

Naruto shrugged. "Well, I got to eat something before I sleep, or Lee will hurt me in the morning."

"Naruto, I thought the training would run late, so I prepared a dinner. You can have some if you like," Hinata offered as she retrieved her backpack.

"That, that's okay, Hinata," Naruto said quickly, "y-you don't have to do that…" his voice trailed off as he saw the size of the bento she pulled out of her pack. The bamboo lunch box was obviously sized for more than one meal.

It should be, since she spent over an hour filling it before leaving for the team meeting.

"Naruto," she said quietly, "I made enough for two. I appreciate you agreeing to work with me. It's… it's really a big help."

Naruto shrugged as she slid open the box. He tried not to drool when he saw what was in there. "I like sparring with you. It's really a challenge to block your attacks so I wouldn't still get zapped. When you get used to the weights, you'll probably go back to hitting me six times for every time I hit you. Besides, you really helped me today, too. I had no idea why I kept losing my footing like that."

Hinata ducked her head as she handed him a small square of porcelain. Using a pair of chopsticks, she quickly loaded it down with curry rice, cold baked fish with a miso glaze, sesame green beans, and potato noodles with daikon. Naruto's eyes literally bulged as he took a long sniff and let out a low whistle. Finally, she pulled an extra pair of chopsticks out of a paper sleeve and handed them to Naruto.

After a heartfelt "Itadakimasu!" Naruto took small bites of each dish, each of which was followed by an appreciative noise that made Hinata blush a little harder each time, distracting her as she removed

a ceramic cylinder from her bag and unscrewed the top. After a few moments, Naruto looked up with surprised eyes when Hinata handed him a cup of tea she'd just poured from the thermos. He took a small sip and shook his head. "Wow Hinata, I had no idea you could cook like this. If you ever got tired of being a ninja, you could get a job at Moritake's, or, or even with old man Ichiraku!"

Hinata stared at Naruto as she felt her stomach drop like a stone. Was he telling her that he didn't think she'd make it as a ninja? Didn't he understand that her father would never let her work like a 'common tradesman'? She stared into his blue eyes as she felt tears begin to well up in her own.

Then she remembered her sensei's words. *Hinata, we both know that Naruto hasn't had a lot of friends at the academy. I can't really say why, but it's not his fault. He hasn't had many people be nice to him, and so he's sort of out of practice at being nice himself. So when he tries… he's likely to be clumsy. Don't take anything he says too seriously if you think it's meant to be hurtful. Naruto isn't like most people – he doesn't hide his emotions at all. So if there are two ways to interpret what he says, and he's smiling at you, assume the nicer one and you'll be right every time.* Naruto was, in fact, smiling at her, so she made herself smile back – because he wasn't saying she shouldn't try to be a ninja. He was just saying that she was a ninja who was also a good cook.

They sat there on the bank of the pond, eating dinner as the sun slowly sank behind the trees. Hinata enjoyed that meal more than any she had ever eaten at the Hyuuga compound.

But she still wondered what Naruto had been so anxious about.

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Kurenai was a little surprised when Hinata approached her about where to find some wrist and ankle weights. She supposed she shouldn't have been shocked, given the success that Naruto was having with them. The boy was incapable of keeping a training strategy secret for the competitive edge it would give him. At least as

far as his teammates were concerned, she could only approve of his ethics. While she never used weights herself, Kurenai was not primarily a hand-to-hand fighter either. Speed was crucial for Hinata to successfully use her Jyuuken, so it made sense of a sort. If she couldn't find wrist and ankle bracers small enough for Hinata's limbs, Kurenai resolved to approach Tenten's father about having some made.

Watching Hinata hurl herself at Shino, scoring a glancing hit on his forearm, Kurenai wondered how their joint training had gone. Hinata was slightly more aggressive than usual, which was something she'd been trying to encourage in the girl. Naruto was a little quieter than usual, which was also welcome. He did, however, seem to be extremely focused on Shino and Hinata's sparring – enough so that Kurenai was hesitant to pull him aside to test his progress with Gai and Lee.

All of her students seemed to be fairly relaxed, and worked together with little friction. Whatever Hinata had seen the previous day must not have affected their relationship. Kurenai had confidence her genin would take the correct path once she knew the truth, but she wasn't that anxious to immediately put her intuition to the test.

After an hour of sparring to get everyone warmed up and loose, Kurenai called a halt and they made their way to the Hokage's tower for their next mission. Naruto made a whispered comment to Hinata that made the Hyuuga heiress stumble and let out a quiet giggle. Shino turned to look at his teammates, only to have them assume perfectly sober expressions. The bug-user nodded slightly, then resumed looking straight ahead. Kurenai had the oddest feeling he was possibly also smiling behind the high collar of his jacket – if that was even possible.

Kurenai considered the rising morale of her genins and wondered what was happening when she was not around. Whatever it was, she hoped it continued.

It wasn't until three days later that she was reminded that everything had its price, and even good morale could be dangerous in its own way.

They were returning to the Hokage's tower after their first mission of the day, another cat retrieval. The Fire Lord's wife was most appreciative, though she was a little disconcerted when her pet was clearly reluctant to leave Hinata's arms. Naruto, who was less than fond of the cat that shunned him, appeared not to notice, while the rest of his team kept their expressions carefully neutral.

As they made their way through the lunch-time foot traffic, Kurenai noticed a disturbance coming from up ahead. Several figures were moving above the roof line at high speed, and distant shouts were echoing above the street noise.

The distant "crump!" of an explosion got everyone's attention, and the streets cleared with surprising rapidity. Despite a decade of peace, Konoha was still a hidden village, and its inhabitants were not ignorant of danger.

Kurenai's eyes expertly tracked the movements as the figures approached. One figure appeared to be pursued by several, and the pursuers were wearing ANBU masks. At their current course, they would pass within a block of Team 8's position. Something flew backward from the pursued, and a rooftop disappeared in a huge ball of fire, making the ANBU detour around the explosion.

Kurenai considered intercepting the fugitive, but paused, remembering the unseasoned genins behind her. She drew a kunai with her left hand, while her right formed the seals for a masking genjutsu that would disguise her team. She had no intention of risking them against an unknown shinobi that seemed willing to anger an ANBU squad.

Too bad her team was no longer behind her.

Kurenai bit off a curse as she dropped the illusion and spun back toward the chase. At first, she saw nothing except the ANBU and their quarry.

Suddenly, half a dozen Naruto's leapt out from between two buildings. The shinobi, who Kurenai could now see wore no insignia over a dark purple combat suit, spun and hurled a double-handful of shuriken at the boys. Four of them disappeared in puffs of smoke, but the last two avoided all the projectiles and slammed into their target, wrenching at his legs.

Off balance and hobbled, the shinobi lost his footing on landing and the three of them skidded and rolled across the roof of a furniture-maker. The two bunshin were disrupted by the hard landing, so the shinobi easily rolled to his feet and straightened the visor that hid his eyes. More purple cloth covered the rest of his head, concealing his gender, but Kurenai thought he moved like a man as she leapt toward the rooftop.

Naruto, however, beat her to the punch. He suddenly appeared, alone, in the air above the rooftop. Kurenai saw two more in the alleyway she was passing over and realized they must have thrown him into the air. "Kage Bunshin No Jutsu!" the one in the air yelled, and suddenly it was raining Narutos.

Kurenai lost track of the original as she moved to get an angle for a kunai-throw at her genin's target. That was easier said than accomplished, because Narutos were attacking him from every direction. The speed Naruto developed in his morning training sessions was very apparent now – his clones were little more than blurs as they landed and hurled themselves at their foe.

The shinobi, however, was not an easy target. He blocked and countered with a degree of skill that worried Kurenai. He even avoided the first two kunai that she threw, dodging by the smallest of margins. But eventually, Naruto scored, and delivered a spinning roundhouse kick to the head that knocked the shinobi off his feet. The shinobi tumbled over and over until he rolled off the roof and into

an alleyway. Naruto thrust his fist into the air and yelled "Yatta!" in triumph… not noticing the explosive tag that the shinobi had left behind.

Kurenai opened her mouth to shout a warning when the rooftop was engulfed in a ball of flame. She was hurled backward, helpless as a leaf in a storm, and curled her body into a ball to control her tumble. She ricocheted off the side of another building and angled toward the alleyway that murderous bastard had fallen into.

The jonin landed hard on the dirty cobbles, but she regained her balance in time to see a blurry figure fleeing down the haze-filled alleyway. The screams of frightened civilians were distracting, but she knew if the fire crews arrived soon they could confine the fire to a single roof. But that wouldn't help if they couldn't stop the one setting off the explosions.

Her quarry pelted down the alleyway, with Kurenai slowly gaining on him. He was limping a little; proof that Naruto's blows had counted. Her stomach contracted, wondering what happened to her student, but now was not the time…

Especially when Shino had just stepped into the mouth of the alleyway, blocking it.

With a smooth, practiced motion, the shinobi let his right arm fall straight downward at his side. With a sudden twist of his wrist, a pair of sharp metal blades shot out of the end of his sleeve, extending a foot past the back of his hand.

Shino started to turn, but his hands were in his jacket pockets, and he was moving far too slow to avoid…

The nameless shinobi rammed the metal blades into the genin's chest as Kurenai watched, still several paces behind, too far away to do anything as her throat burned with acid. The shinobi twisted his whole body in a powerful motion, and the blades tore through the side of the boy's chest as he exploded in a fountain of… bugs?

The henge wavered and disappeared, and in Shino's place, a large mass of kikai bugs took to the air and settled on the shinobi. Kurenai noticed that a good portion of them seemed to be settling between the shinobi's shoulder blades, where he couldn't easily brush them off.

Half-blinded, the shinobi stumbled out of the alleyway, only to find a small, timid-looking twelve year old girl waiting for him.

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Hinata wasn't completely convinced that this was a great idea. But when Naruto signaled her and Shino, she couldn't stop herself. They'd worked out once, while eating a quick lunch at Ichiraku's, what they could do if they were discovered by an enemy scout and needed to capture him or her before they could report back. It seemed so simple in theory, but the execution… she'd heard the explosion, and even though Naruto promised to be careful, she was worried. Shino's Kikai Bunshin looked so real that she almost screamed when she saw the blades poke out of its back.

But everything had worked fairly well up to this point, and now it was down to her. That was the problem. She didn't know why she agreed to take care of the final phase. It made sense, she supposed, in terms of what she could do… but it also meant that if she failed, all their efforts would be for nothing. Naruto and Shino had done their parts perfectly. The target was at least a little damaged, and more importantly was limping. Shino's kikai bugs were now draining his chakra reserves. But now it was Hinata's duty to make sure he didn't slip away to recuperate.

Hinata suddenly felt very small and weak. The shinobi, no matter how bruised, was a fully grown man, like her father. There was no way a weak little girl could hope to stop him. Not one who failed at everything she tried. She just hoped Naruto hadn't gotten hurt for nothing…

Naruto… the thought of her teammate made her chest clench with pain. He'd always encouraged her, always worked with her. He didn't

think she was a failure like everyone else did. Now he would know better. Now he would look at her like everyone else, with pity… or contempt, like her father.

Suddenly a new emotion burned in her heart. It was the same one that burned when she saw how the villagers treated Naruto, the same one that burned when she saw how her fellow genins didn't respect him, only now it burned for her.

She wouldn't let Naruto down.

She'd die before she'd let that happen.

She activated her Byakugan, took another step toward her enemy and suddenly everything seemed to slow down. "Divine Sixty-Four Strikes" she whispered and she could see a sudden tracery surrounding them. Time seemed to slow down even more as she became acutely aware of every detail of their relative positions and the angles of their limbs. Her hands began to move like quicksilver traceries, moving around the blades, around his arms, seeking their glowing targets.

Her foe tried to block, tried to counter her flashing hands, but he was too close, too off-balance to stop her completely. Three strikes were deflected before her chakra-emitting fingers brushed across the Tenketsu on his left shoulder, closing it. The joint immediately froze, and the muscles bulging around it gave evidence of his pain. The next series shut down his elbow and wrist on the opposite arm, and now there was no stopping her. Time began to speed up again as she systematically closed his chakra holes in a pattern that would look random to anyone else.

Betrayed by his numbed body, the shinobi fell to his knees and Hinata froze, pulling her last blow, palm quivering an inch from his forehead. The ANBU might want to talk to him, after all. She drew back into a ready position as the man collapsed backwards.

Hinata found herself panting with exertion and discharged nervous tension. Had she actually done that?

A shout from the alleyway snapped her out of her daze. Naruto, looking a little rumpled and ash-streaked, thrust his fist into the air. "Yeah, Hinata! Way to kick his butt!"

She had.

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Yuuhi Kurenai was sure that she was getting too old for this. For that matter, she didn't think she'd been born young enough to deal with this. Not only had her genins rushed to engage an unknown enemy, but she'd watched what looked like two of them die from it. She took a deep breath as Naruto cheered a vividly blushing Hinata and the ANBU squad landed in the street.

Their leader, a shinobi wearing a bear mask, inclined his head respectfully toward her. "Good work," he said. "He stole a scroll from the Hokage's tower and led us on quite a chase."

Kurenai pinched the bridge of her nose. The clatter of the fire-wagon was only adding to her headache. "I didn't do this," she said flatly. "My less than obedient genins decided to take matters into their own hands."

The ANBU glanced at each other and then took a closer look at her genins. Shino stepped from behind a doorway and his kikai bugs marched toward him in a steady stream. Naruto, who'd been patting a stunned Hinata on the shoulder looked up at his sensei's words and scowled.

Kurenai held her tongue as the ANBU took down their names and statements, bound up the unconscious shinobi's arms and legs, and carried him off for interrogation. The crew of the fire-wagon had the small fire on the rooftop extinguished as well, so they resumed their journey.

Naruto was still scowling in outrage, but Hinata just looked ashamed. Kurenai began to feel the prickle of her conscience when Shino, of all people broke the silence.

"I understand that disobeying an order is a serious offense, sensei," he said in an even voice, devoid of any tone whatsoever. "However, if you gave us an order not to intervene, I did not hear it. I also understand that, as Konoha Shinobi, we are obligated to assist ANBU members in pursuit of their duties whenever possible."

"That is correct," Kurenai admitted with a sigh. "You three deployed before I had a chance to tell you to stand down."

"Why would you want us to do that?" Naruto asked, "We nailed him good!"

Kurenai turned on her student. "Because you had no way of knowing how powerful he was. He could have killed you all without blinking!"

"But he did not," Shino reminded her.

"That is correct," Kurenai agreed. "You got lucky. Do not forget that."

They were quiet the rest of the way to the Hokage's office. The chuunins guarding his door had evidently heard the news, because the looks they gave Team 8 were oddly respectful.

The Hokage himself was unusually animated, and waved for them to sit down in the chairs provided. "We think we have identified him. He is an infiltrator from Cloud, and he made off with several sensitive documents." He paused theatrically, "Although ranked a jonin, he was a stealth specialist. For all that, he was still capable of directly fighting at a minimum of chuunin level. It's very impressive that your team was able to stop him, Kurenai."

Kurenai shrugged. Over the worst of the shock, she'd recovered some of her equilibrium. "I didn't do much of anything," she admitted wryly. "They did it all without me."

"On the contrary," the Hokage said with a smile, "from the reports, they fought well together as a team. And that is a testament to your training."

Kurenai blinked. "Thank you, Hokage-sama."

"As a reward for assisting in the capture of a dangerous fugitive, I'm awarding you pay equivalent to a C-rank mission," the Hokage said with a smile. Before Kurenai could do more than open her mouth he continued, "That's at least the rank of mission I'd have to assign to get those scrolls back – and that to an entire hunter team. Besides, by the time everything had been straightened out, the remainder of today's D-rank missions had been taken."

"Thank you, Hokage-sama," Kurenai repeated.

"I think," the Hokage continued, "that this, along with all the D-rank missions you've accomplished, qualifies you for your first true C-rank mission. Come back tomorrow and we will have the details ready for your first border patrol."

A/N: Well, that was the biggest chapter I have ever written for a fanfic. Hope you like it.

Please address any questions or concerns to my yahoo group, Viridian Dream. Link is in my Author Profile.

-Matthew

# Difficult Preparations

Chapter 5

Hinata was still a little shaky when she arrived at the Hyuuga compound. Kurenai-sensei suggested that they should forgo their normal evening training and make sure they got a full night's sleep. Depending on their assignment, they may have to set out immediately. Though she understood the reasons, Hinata was disappointed that she and Naruto wouldn't get to eat the dinner she'd packed that morning. She thought the shitake udon had come out rather well, and she wanted to see Naruto's face when he tasted it. Perhaps she could pack some for their journey to the border.

Though she'd come home earlier than usual, the main house was still quiet. Her father must be occupied with the village council again. She felt herself relax for a moment before she realized what she was doing and chided herself for her disrespect. He was still her father, and it was… unseemly… for her to be glad at his absence. Worse, he would probably detect her disloyal feelings when he returned, and it would be his duty to punish her for failing to show proper respect.

"Hinata?" her father's voice interrupted her thoughts, and she hated herself for the way she jumped. Her fear was unworthy of a Hyuuga.

"Yes father?" she replied in a quiet, but precise voice. If she could take down an enemy spy, surely she could talk to her own father.

"You will follow me to the training room," he said, walking down the hallway without another word.

Hinata followed, her bare feet silent on the polished wood. When she reached the Dojo, Father was waiting for her, along with her cousin and younger sister. Neji was as impassive as ever, though she wondered if his eyes smoldered with resentment when no one else

could see. Hanabi was openly glowering, the expression on her face at odds with the graceful features she'd inherited from their mother.

Hinata's own face seemed to be a mixture of her father and mother, in varying amounts. There was a touch of the clan leader in the line of her brows, and the angle of her jaw… the latter of course rarely visible given the way she tended to duck her head around others. Hanabi, on the other hand, was the very image of their mother, a woman the younger girl had never known. Hinata remembered that beloved face though, and savored the memories of the kind-hearted woman who'd treasured her only daughter.

Of course, that made it difficult to fight with Hanabi. One look at those eyes, no matter how angry they seemed, always softened her hands. Her heartache and longing for the only person who seemed to understand her, to treasure her, had no place in the sparring ring. Nevertheless, they intruded constantly, sapping her will to fight. No matter how disappointed her father became with her, Hinata couldn't force herself to hate her sister, to strike her down as he demanded during their sparring matches.

So it was inevitable that Hanabi would triumph against her larger, but mostly passive, sister. Father had first been amazed at Hanabi's prowess, and it lifted Hinata's heart a little to see her sister smile as she basked under Father's praise. But eventually his surprise turned to disappointment in his oldest daughter, who could not hold her own against a girl several years her junior. Hanabi continued to work hard, thriving under Father's amazed tutelage, while Hinata was always more and more of a disappointment.

Today was no different from any other, though perhaps Hanabi's expression was a little more fierce than usual. Hinata briefly wondered about this, before her father's voice derailed her train of thought.

"I am to understand," he said in a low voice, "if certain members of ANBU are to be believed, that you played a role in the capture of a spy today?"

Hinata's heart contracted into a hard lump at the patina of frost that overlaid her father's words. She'd thought about telling him herself when she saw him, hoping he would be proud of her. But he'd already heard about it, and did not seem happy at the news. "H-hai," she said in a faltering voice.

"I am *told* ," he continued, emphasizing the last word, "that you utilized an advanced technique to disable your opponent."

"A-ano, my teammates also–" She began.

"I do not care about them," her father snapped. "And you will not speak of that low-born trash again. It is *your* behavior that reflects on our clan, not theirs. Hanabi, assume a guard position."

Hanabi made a half-turn, moving smoothly into a basic Jyuuken defensive stance. Her eyes bored into Hinata's and Hinata knew her sister did not like the news she had heard.

"Hinata, you will now demonstrate this *technique* of yours," her father commanded.

Hinata stared at her sister and swallowed. She remembered the state of mind she'd been in, the determination to stop her foe or die trying, the determination to not let her team down, the determination to show Naruto what she could do. She felt none of that now, in front of the cold eyes of her family, quailing before the rage and… something else burning in her sister's eyes. Was it fear? Hinata did not want to hurt her, even for Father. "Otou-san, I…"

"As I suspected," he said coolly, "your role in this was exaggerated, possibly in a misguided attempt to curry favor with the clan. I knew you were weak, Hinata, but to find that you lack honor as well? This is very disappointing."

"Gomen, Otou-san, but I… I did not know you were told of…" Hinata's voice trailed off. She didn't want to lie, but she also didn't want to have to attack her sister's Tenketsu points. Hinata wasn't

even sure she could do it now if she wanted to. That moment in the street… she'd briefly possessed a moment of sublime clarity. And now… now she felt like she was veiled in heavy fabric, closing in her vision, muffling her voice, stifling her breathing. Maybe it was better that her father didn't know of it. Her moment was brief and had now passed. She let out an inaudible sigh and hung her head. Hanabi's quiet snort of contempt was all the more noticeable.

"Perhaps you did not know of that," Hiashi allowed. The constriction in her chest loosened a little and she dared look up again. "But it is important that you and Hanabi be made aware of the differences between the basic Jyuuken techniques you use, and the truly advanced moves used by those who mastered more of our clan's style. Neji will assist me in demonstrating some of these techniques for you." His eyes hardened. "We will take all night if it is necessary."

"A-ano, Otou-san," Hinata said quickly, tightening her fingers on the hem of her jacket to keep them from shaking, "I have been instructed to prepare tonight for a mission of at least a week's duration."

The Dojo was deadly quiet, and in the stillness, Hinata thought she might have sensed Neji's left eyebrow move a millimeter upward.

Her father's voice was as hard as a kunai and would brook no compromise. "Then you had better learn quickly," he said in an emotionless voice, that to Hinata's practiced ear carried the overtones of a snarl.

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Aburame Shino returned home to find his father and mother waiting for him. As it was a little early for his father to be home, he regarded them with a raised eyebrow. "Mother, Father," he greeted them with a deferential nod.

Aburame Shibi regarded his son with a neutral expression, his eyes hidden behind equally dark glasses. "One of my colleagues," he said quietly, "informed me of your actions earlier today."

"I see," Shino said.

"The ANBU were quite impressed," his father continued. "Your Kikai-Bunshin was apparently flawless, and proved capable of deceiving a Jonin. The direction of your allies afterward was precise and timely, and their positioning above the thoracic vertebrae made quick removal impossible. Our relatives are quite impressed with your skill."

"More importantly," his mother interrupted, smiling broadly, " *we're* proud of you." Misato was not a typical member of the Aburame clan. This made sense, as she was a kunoichi his father had met on a diplomatic mission to the Hidden Village of Mist. She was, however, as fascinated with insects as the rest of his relatives, and her 'mantis-style' fighting, using twin serrated blades that mimicked the claws of a praying mantis, had evidently intrigued the enigmatic Konoha shinobi.

Despite common interests, Misato *was* different. She actually smiled occasionally, and was far more emotionally demonstrative than the other members of a very reserved and dignified clan. Shino noted that his father neither encouraged nor discouraged these displays of sentiment… but his attention always seemed fixed upon her while they were happening, which was probably enough by itself. From listening to conversations he was supposedly too young to understand, Shino realized that many Aburames were less than sanguine about having one of their clan's most gifted practitioners marrying someone outside the bloodline. However, Shino's rapid development banished their fears, and led to his father raising a mildly sardonic eyebrow and remarking upon "hybrid vigor".

But Shino had better things to do than bask in his parents' regard, no matter how pleasant. Unanswered questions nagged at the back of his mind, like splinters embedded in flesh, and only answers would give relief. "I appreciate your sentiments, but the role I played in the capture was largely peripheral. While I did drain the subject's chakra reserves, Uzumaki Naruto made the original interception and assault, while Hyuuga Hinata performed the actual takedown."

"Your modesty and sense of teamwork do you credit," his father observed.

Shino nodded almost imperceptibly. "Perhaps. I have been surprised at Naruto's progress in his training, especially with the expectations I had gleaned from others, both in and out of the academy," he observed coolly.

As expected, both of his parents flinched a little at the import of his words, and glanced at each other. "If you have first hand knowledge of something," his father said carefully, "it is probably better to rely upon that, instead of second-hand observations."

"My question is the source of those second-hand observations," Shino replied, bearing down on the cause of his mental distractions of late.

His mother grimaced and rolled her eyes. "I think I'll see about dinner," she said as she left the room, shaking her head.

Shino was left with his father, who seemed unusually agitated… for an Aburame, at least. Finally, he sighed and actually grimaced himself, the rare expression curling his thin moustache. "There are… restrictions placed around certain pieces of information. As a resident of Konoha, I am required to honor those restrictions. In light of your… observations these last few weeks, I will allow that the implications of… certain facts… may have been misinterpreted or exaggerated."

"You are picking your words with great care," Shino observed.

"Correct," his father agreed. "I am attempting to avoid committing a capital offense."

Shino didn't even bother trying to keep his eyebrows from rising above his glasses. Unlike some hidden villages, there were not a lot of laws in Konoha that carried a death penalty. Outright treason could merit such a punishment, but what would that have to do with

his teammate? None of this made sense, but it wasn't surprising that he couldn't puzzle out the meaning – not if he wasn't even allowed to see all the pieces. "Given what you know, that I do not," he asked, "what would you do in my place?"

His father seemed to relax a little, though an outsider would have been hard-pressed to notice the difference. "I would continue as you have, keeping your eyes open. If you perchance discover something… unusual… remember what I said about first-hand knowledge being superior."

"I will… attempt to keep that in mind," Shino promised.

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Naruto stayed behind for a moment as his teammates left. Kurenai looked at him curiously as he cleared his throat. "Ano, Kurenai-sensei, I was wondering about our pay for… for this afternoon."

She nodded toward the opened envelope in Naruto's hands. "Yes, that is normally done for higher-ranked missions. Given their simplicity and lack of risk, D-rank missions are usually paid out of the Hokage's petty cash. But for higher-ranked missions, they often do not have the funds on hand required to pay the shinobi. So they use vouchers like you have there. It's just a slip of paper, stamped with the Hokage's seal, but any bank or moneylender in Konoha will redeem it for the amount listed. A simple jutsu bound to the seal will consume it instantly if anyone tries to alter it."

Naruto nodded intently as she explained the reasons for the vouchers, but as she finished he sighed and his shoulders seemed to slump. "I wonder if Old Man Ichiraku can…" he muttered.

At that point, Kurenai made the connection and mentally kicked herself. If she'd been thinking ahead, she could have already dealt with this in a manner less embarrassing for the boy. "Ah, you still need to set up a bank account, don't you?"

Naruto nodded, his face flushing a little. Kurenai actually found the normally brash genin to be a little more appealing when he was flustered like this. She idly wondered what effect that would have on Hinata, and how she could bring such an event to pass. Perhaps later, in a year or two… She abandoned that train of thought for the issue before her. "Well, I need to go deposit my voucher, since the Hokage saw fit to reward me for doing little more than watching you three fight. Come with me and I'll show you how to set up a bank account."

Naruto nodded gratefully, and Kurenai congratulated herself for finding a way to help him that didn't seem like a large imposition on her part. As they left the Hokage's tower and made their way through the rising dinner-time foot traffic, Kurenai increased their pace to a fast walk. The bank she used typically stayed open until dinner in order to accommodate the tradesmen who were the bulk of their clientele.

Their first significant delay occurred outside the bank itself. Two large, brawny men in heavy armor and carrying naginatas were on duty at the entrance. Their size and equipment were intended more to deter casual thieves than real shinobi, but their bladed pole arms *were* blocking the entrance. "You are still open," she observed coolly, "I can see customers inside."

"You may enter," the one on the left said gruffly, "but not *him.* "

Naruto flinched a little, seemingly in spite of himself, and Kurenai felt even more ashamed of her village. But now was not the time for softer emotions. "You tread a dangerous path," she hissed. "This boy was just rewarded by the Hokage for intercepting an enemy jonin that had outrun the ANBU. The spy is now back at the tower, entertaining Ibiki." She used the interrogation specialist's name quite deliberately, and was gratified to see the grown men shudder at her words, even as Naruto scratched his head.

"Be that as it may," the older one on the right said slowly, "we have specific orders regarding the boy."

Kurenai frowned. These men could lose their positions if they disobeyed a direct order, but who would issue such a command? Previously, the animosity toward the Jinchuuriki seemed to be more personal and unorganized. Was someone attempting to provoke Naruto into doing something that would discredit him in the eyes of the village, and perhaps cost him the Hokage's protection? "I think I understand," she said slowly. "Your superiors may be concerned about a prank of some sort. I can assure you that this is a legitimate task, and that he will perform no pranks within this building. You have my word as a jonin that I will assume full responsibility for his behavior inside." She hoped they would seize upon this pretext to placate their superiors.

The two guards glanced at each other for a moment. Then the older one nodded and they each moved their naginata aside, breathing a sigh of relief. Noting that, Kurenai realized that she'd been bringing considerable amounts of killer intent to bear on them. Her anger at Naruto's treatment had become stronger, rather than weaker, over time, but she was still mildly surprised at this lapse in control. Even if it had made convincing them to accept her word easier, it was still unprofessional.

Naruto was on his best behavior as they entered, looking around curiously. The décor was understated, but a bit nicer than most of the stores he'd likely seen. She guided them toward the counter when the second delay, in the form of the manager, stepped into their path.

"I am sorry, Madam Yuuhi," the unctuous middle-aged man said, using a form of address that Kurenai did not appreciate, "but as it is late in the day, we are not opening new accounts at this time. I understand that there is another bank, not far from here, that remains open-"

The man's smile was just a little too smug, and Kurenai could already guess where this would go. They would get re-directed from bank to bank, branch to branch, until they were left with a seedy moneylender who charged usurious rates, or simply gave up in disgust. "Very well," she snapped, "clear out my account, bring me

the funds, in cash, and I will return to the Hokage's Tower to inform him that his vouchers are no longer accepted at your bank."

The manager paled suddenly. As a moderate workaholic with modest tastes and a house she'd inherited from her parents, Kurenai's savings were considerable. In cash, it would be an inconvenient mass, but she didn't really care at this point. Besides, people walking out of a bank with unusually large amounts of coin tended to spawn rumors that there was something wrong, rumors that could become self-fulfilling prophecies if they started a run on the bank. Especially if the other shinobi heard he had refused a voucher…

Now the man looked trapped, and Kurenai really wanted to know why. "I'm sure that will not be necessary," he said quickly.

"Then we should get started immediately," Kurenai replied in a deceptively mild tone. "I don't want to keep your subordinates here too long, but we both leave for a mission in the morning."

The manager appeared to be thinking for a moment, but then nodded suddenly. "As all of my employees are helping customers, I will assist you myself."

Kurenai was suspicious of his suddenly cooperative mood, but allowed them both to be lead to his office. The actual process to set up a basic account was fairly simple: Naruto just needed to sign several legal documents, none of which he bothered to read first. While Kurenai supposed she should be touched by his trust in her, she resolved to discuss with him the proper way to analyze a legal document – preferably before signing them. If, no, she corrected herself, *when* he became Hokage, he would need to be *very* careful in what he signed.

As they finished the documents, Naruto reluctantly handed over the pay voucher that had prompted this entire expedition. The manager's eyes widened a little when he saw the sum written by the Hokage's hand. The Sandaime had been generous, but he was correct that it was less than he would have expended on a Hunter-Nin squad if the

spy had escaped. Looking at the manager, she decided to grind the kunai into the bone a little more. Taking out her own voucher, she left it on his desk while she plucked a deposit envelope from the stack. Seemingly of their own volition, the man's eyes wandered over to her slip, allowing him to see that it was the same size as Naruto's.

Smiling sweetly, Kurenai nodded. "The Hokage was quite generous, but Naruto and his team *did* intercept a jonin who'd stolen scrolls from the Hokage's tower, and was successfully evading an entire ANBU squad. Naruto intercepted him, and his teammates finished him off well before the ANBU arrived." Looking directly into the man's eyes, she gestured at her voucher. "All before I could do anything. I got *that* just for training them, the Hokage was so impressed… he didn't even care that they'd beaten me to the punch."

The manager now looked almost nauseous with fear. Kurenai was tempted to arrange for a loud, sudden sound – just to see if he would flee in terror. She glanced over at her student. Naruto's prankster spirit appeared to be rubbing off on her in some ways she hadn't anticipated.

For his own part, Naruto's face was pink from her words. He scratched at the back of his head and cracked a nervous grin. "Ano, Sensei, you say too much. All I did was-"

"All you did," Kurenai interjected, "was volunteer to make the initial interception. Facing a fresh enemy, that's the most dangerous role. Not only did you stop him, but you also damaged him so he could no longer get away from us or the ANBU."

Naruto shrugged. "I'm supposed to protect my teammates, right?"

Kurenai smiled at her student. He'd embraced his role within the team to a greater degree than she'd hoped. Hinata was inevitable, she supposed, all her machinations aside, but he was also seeking to protect Shino as well. "You are exactly correct, Uzumaki-san," she replied in a formal tone, making the boy blush again. Turning to their

somewhat dumbstruck audience of one, her voice lost some of its warmth. "Is there anything else?" she asked.

The manager shook his head quickly, but Naruto spoke up. "Sensei, this puts all of the voucher-thing in my account, correct? What if I want to keep some of the money myself?"

"The money in your account belongs to you as well," Kurenai clarified. "And you can pull out as much of it as you want at any time. When you deposit a voucher, you can request that a portion of it be given to you as cash."

"How much should I deposit and how much should I keep?" he asked. Kurenai noticed that when he was trying to wrestle with an unfamiliar concept, Naruto tended to tune out everything else. Right now he was totally focused on her, ignoring the manager who'd angered them so much earlier. Kurenai found it a particularly satisfying experience as a teacher, to have such an attentive student hanging on her words. *Those fools at the academy…* she mused.

"You should, at a minimum, try to save at least a third of what you make, and try not to touch it except for emergencies. If you can, save more…" Kurenai answered, her voice trailing off as she wondered how best to explain what she wanted to say. "It's like carrying kunai," she continued after a moment. "How many is a Konoha shinobi required to carry?"

"Three for active duty," Naruto replied automatically, his voice taking on the sing-song tone of a well-memorized fact.

*Well, Iruka would at least make sure he was well-grounded in the basics,* she mused. "And how many do you carry, Naruto?"

"Er, well…" he hesitated, glancing at the manager, "a lot more."

Kurenai smiled slightly at his caution with an operational secret. Another test passed. "And why is that, Naruto?"

"Because you never know when you might need more than three," he said, shrugging. Then his eyes widened as he made the connection. "So money is like kunai?" he asked.

She nodded. "Correct, it's better to have more than you need than not enough. And since we are leaving for a mission tomorrow, you likely will not need much money in your pockets, will you? I would deposit all of that, and then when you return, you will have another voucher waiting for you. I imagine you'll be eager to visit Ichiraku at that point, yes?"

Naruto nodded eagerly as he filled out the deposit slip and slid his voucher into the stiff paper. When he finished, he looked up expectantly.

"Very good, Naruto," Kurenai said approvingly. "When we return to Konoha, I will show you how to use an account register so you can keep track of your money. For right now, I need to have a few words with the manager about my account. You should probably have a good supper and try to get to sleep early. We'll be getting an early start tomorrow, remember we are meeting at the Hokage's tower at nine. Don't be late."

When the genin left the office, Kurenai returned her attention to the manager, who had partially regained his composure. "Explain yourself," she snapped.

"I… I do not know what you mean," the man stammered, taken off guard by her abrupt change in demeanor.

"You attempted to refuse service to a Konoha shinobi who has done nothing to you and yours. He was nearly killed this afternoon protecting shopkeepers and merchants from an enemy jonin who was entirely too careless with explosive tags. Now, when he's trying to cash in his reward, *given directly to him by the Hokage* , you try to turn us away. Rudeness and abuse he is all too familiar with, but this is different, isn't it? You *knew* if he went to another bank, he'd get the same treatment, didn't you?" Kurenai's red eyes bored into the

watery brown ones possessed by the manager, and below the edge of his desk, her fingers quickly formed the seals she needed.

The genjutsu she cast was a fairly subtle one, designed to get the truth from those who did not wish to reveal it. It didn't force the subject to speak, but it inspired a certain terror of the caster, and a profound fear of being caught in a lie. Its effectiveness was inversely proportional to the subject's strength of will, making it nearly useless on shinobi, and she knew someone like Ibiki would consider it an effeminate substitute for his interrogation skills. On the other hand, if the seals were concealed from view, the subject might not even be aware he'd been placed under a genjutsu.

Of course, using it on a Konoha citizen was rather questionable, and something that could have earned her a long explanation with the Konoha Military Police, before they were decimated. At the least, it would still earn her an interview with the Hokage if it were discovered. On the other hand, she felt that her observations gave her probable cause to expect that there was some sort of organized resistance to Naruto's presence in Konoha. As that was an attempt to subvert the spirit, if not the letter of the Hokage's law concerning the boy, she felt that she could skate on that issue if it came down to it.

The manager's words dispelled these concerns in an instant. "I didn't *know* for sure, but I did suspect," he answered nervously, looking like he wanted to be anywhere else but talking to this furious kunoichi. "T-there was a gathering of the bankers and moneylenders after the last Village Council meeting. Our representative to the Council of Elders said that we were to… discourage… the boy from patronizing our establishments. If he became violent in any way when refused service, we were to call ANBU immediately."

"I see," Kurenai said, but she really didn't. "And why this sudden change in policy?"

"I do not know," the man said, sagging fearfully. "Many people in our guild would prefer not having *him* in Konoha," he said hesitantly. "But

I think this originally came from the Council," he added.

"Very well," Kurenai said, releasing the subtle genjutsu as she stood up. "I would carefully consider whether you wish to involve yourself in this vendetta some Elder seems to have against the boy. He's ambitious, he works harder than anyone his age, and he's gained the attention of the Sandaime and several senior shinobi with his actions today. He swears he will be Hokage someday, and damned if I don't think he might realize his dream. That will not bode well for anyone that stood in his path to the tower. I will be showing him how to keep track of his account, and for your sake there had better be no 'irregularities' in his balance, or I will personally destroy you. Have I made myself clear?"

The man nodded quickly, so Kurenai spun on her heel and stalked out of the office. After dinner, she'd likely be throwing kunai at the old stump behind her house for an hour before she would be able to sleep. That actually wasn't a bad idea, she reflected as she stepped out onto the street. She needed to do some thinking. Something had changed in Konoha, and she needed to understand what it was, how it would affect her charges, and ultimately her own plans.

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The manager, his mind still reeling from the aftereffects of terror, could only nod dumbly at the jonin's warning. He breathed a sigh of relief as she left his office. After several minutes regaining his composure, he shakily rose to his feet. Clutching the documents the two had signed like a life preserver, he made his way to the central counting room to make sure both transactions were entered into the books accurately. He would just report that the boy's jonin hadn't given him any choice in the matter and threatened to report him directly to the Hokage. No one would blame him in that case. And he would also make sure that Yuuhi Kurenai never had cause to speak to him again.

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With no evening training scheduled, Naruto decided that a leisurely dinner at Ichiraku's was just what the medic-nin ordered.

Surprisingly, the old man had heard about the disturbance downtown, and knew his best customer had been involved. Naruto blinked at the idea of villagers talking about him, and not in the hateful manner he was accustomed to.

At that point, there was nothing to be done but to give a blow-by-blow account of the battle. To his credit, he dwelled as much on his teammates' exploits as his own. In particular, he was impressed by whatever the heck Hinata had done. He'd rolled out of the wreckage right as the jonin reached her, so he'd seen clearly what she did, but that didn't help him understand. He'd never seen her use a technique like that before. Even as hyped up and excited as he'd been from the fighting, her hands were still small white blurs to his eyes. And when she was done, the jonin just dropped to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

Old man Ichiraku smiled as the boy described his teammate's attacks with wild gestures, sound effects, gushing praise. "You know," he observed, "times have changed. When I was your age, girls impressed boys with a pretty kimono, or an elaborate hairstyle with bejeweled pins. Now they do it by beating the hell out of people." He sighed theatrically, suppressing a laugh as Naruto's eyes bulged out comically. "Maybe it's different for kunoichi," he continued. "It's probably cheaper than spending all that money on finery," he laughed, earning a dirty look from Ayame as she set another bowl down in front of blushing Naruto.

"It's not like that," Naruto protested. "She's really good. She works super hard and will do whatever it takes to improve herself. She's probably upset we didn't get to train tonight. It's like…" his voice trailed off as he thought for a moment, chewing the hot noodles. Kurenai was trying to teach him *how* to look 'underneath the underneath', but it was awfully hard to do it all the time. "It's like she has something to prove," he finally said. Then he nodded. "I think that's exactly it, but I don't know what she's trying to prove, or to who."

The old man gave him a vaguely superior smile that made Naruto nervous for some reason. "I'm sure you'll figure it out, eventually, Naruto. Another bowl of Miso?"

Naruto nodded as his chopsticks moved in a blur. A few moments later he put them down and lifted the bowl, draining the savory liquid. He looked up as a familiar presence sat down next to him.

"Ohayo, Iruka-sensei!" he said, greeting his former teacher.

"Hello, Naruto," the chuunin said with a smile. "I see you got started without me." He'd treated Naruto to a few bowls of Ramen since their ordeal in the forest with Mizuki. They didn't talk much about what had been said that night, but they didn't really seem to need to.

"My treat tonight, sensei!" Naruto said happily. Kurenai's lessons on propriety and etiquette were not completely wasted on the genin. He understood that it wasn't appropriate for him to empty Iruka's wallet every time they met.

Iruka's eyebrows raised in surprise. "What is the occasion?" he asked curiously.

Naruto shrugged. "I just felt like I should pay sometimes. Besides I got a good bonus today."

"Oh?" Iruka asked.

"We were coming back from our first d-rank mission, and we saw some ANBU chasing this guy…" Naruto's voice lowered as he launched into a re-telling of the day's battle, this time using more ninja terminology that Iruka would understand.

When he was done, the young man sat on his stool in shock, a bowl of beef ramen cooling untouched before him. "I heard that Kurenai-sama had been involved in the capture… but not her genins…" he whispered, his voice trailing off. Then his eyes hardened, drawing

the scar across the bridge of his nose tight. "What the hell was she thinking, letting you fight a jonin?" he demanded, suddenly furious.

Naruto blinked, eyes wide, he'd rarely seen Iruka really lose his temper like this – not the mock-exasperation he used on recalcitrant students at the Konoha Ninja Academy. "Sensei… we… she didn't order us to attack. She was going to have us hide behind a genjutsu, but we were already moving before she realized…" he explained, his words stumbling over each other.

"Then this was your idea?" Iruka demanded, but his voice had lost most of its harshness. "What were you thinking? He could have killed all of you!"

Now it was Naruto's turn to frown. "Not really," he claimed. "It was actually pretty easy, since we'd worked it out ahead of time."

"Easy?" Iruka asked incredulously, "you could have been incinerated when those tags went off!"

Naruto shook his head. "I knew that guy liked to make explosions, so if I couldn't get clear, I was ready to do a Kawarimi no Jutsu and swap with one of my Kage Bunshins."

Iruka's eyebrows went up. "You can swap with one of your clones?" he asked, clearly impressed.

Naruto nodded. "It's pretty easy," he answered, "since we're already the same shape."

"Yes, but usually the jutsu will disrupt the clone before it can complete," Iruka clarified. "Your Bunshin must be very sturdy," he observed, frowning.

Naruto shrugged. "If I'm concentrating the right way when I mold the chakra, it takes a pretty solid blow to destroy them." He nodded thanks to Ayame when she replaced his bowl. He took a big bite of noodles while they were still hot, enjoying the texture while Iruka sat

staring into the distance. After he swallowed he poked his former teacher in the shoulder, startling him. "Your ramen is getting cold," he reminded him with a cheeky grin. "Besides, everything went according to plan."

"Plan?" Iruka asked as he began eating his ramen.

"Shino, Hinata, and I worked out ahead of time how we would stop someone who was carrying vital information. I would intercept and slow him down, Shino would drain off his chakra, and Hinata would take him down with her Jyuuken," Naruto explained, smiling. "That was the plan and it worked out just right."

Iruka shook his head as he swallowed. "I still have trouble believing you attacked a jonin head-on," he admitted.

"Well, my clones did the first attack," he admitted. "This guy wasn't a big taijutsu specialist, not like Gai-sensei or Lee. I understand he was more of a sneaking-around guy." He shrugged. "If he'd handled my clones like Gai, or even Lee, I'd have had to improvise, you know?"

"Yes, Naruto, but even a chuunin should have been… " now Iruka's eyes narrowed again. "You mentioned doing some extra training with Gai and Lee… how much *have* you been training?"

Naruto shrugged as he drained the broth from another bowl. "Three hours every morning since the day after I left the academy. Gai explains Taijutsu a lot better than Mizuki ever did," he answered, his mouth twisting with distaste at the mention of the traitor who'd deceived him and nearly killed both of them.

Iruka's eyes had gone wide. "How do you have time to train with your team, or do missions?" he asked incredulously.

As Naruto matter-of-factly explained his daily routine, Iruka's ramen was left untouched as his eyes grew wider. When he was done, the chuunin, stood abruptly, excused himself and left. "I'm sorry, Naruto,"

he said, "I just remembered something I forgot to do, and I need to take care of it immediately," he explained. "Thank you for the ramen." He marched off with an angry expression on his face that confused Naruto.

Then the blond-haired boy shrugged and ordered a bowl of pork ramen. He needed to fortify himself for a very long period of ramen-less patrolling.

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Kurenai managed to vent most of her frustrations on an unoffending stump in her backyard when she heard the bell at the front gate to her property. The cottage on the outskirts of Konoha was fairly modest – her parents were middle-class merchants before they were killed in a fire while staying at an inn – so it only took a few moments for her to walk around to the front. It wasn't hard for her to recognize the shadowy figure standing under the lantern hanging from the gate post. She'd wondered when he'd be showing up.

"Umino Iruka," she said by way of greeting.

"Kurenai-sama," the chuunin said shortly.

"What brings you here?" she asked. If he was going to be that way, she'd match his directness.

"Naruto," he said coldly.

"Ah," she replied. "Would you like to come inside?" she asked.

Iruka nodded, and she opened the gate and led him up the stone-lined path to the front porch. They were silent as they removed their sandals at the door, and Kurenai hung the bandolier of practice kunai on a hook. Iruka accepted a seat in her living room, while she retired to the kitchen to prepare tea. While her parents had preferred western-influenced architecture for their home, Kurenai grew up in a household with very traditional customs. As such, a guest was not entertained without some offer of refreshment.

Besides, making tea gave her a chance to think, even as it gave Iruka a chance to cool off. The chuunin did seem somewhat more composed as he accepted his tea with a polite nod.

Kurenai decided to wait him out. That put her into a marginally stronger position and increased the odds that she could convince him to cooperate, or at least not interfere. She knew Naruto was close to his old teacher, one of the first adults to accept him for what he was, instead of what they feared he was. Her interview with the man shortly after her team was assigned revealed that his feelings for the boy were genuine, and not feigned. But… he was also a worrier. He knew Naruto had not received the best training at the Konoha Ninja Academy, and practically begged her to take it easy on him, and not expose him to undue risks. Knowing this, she knew he could not have been happy with Naruto's involvement in the skirmish earlier that day.

Kurenai knew she needed this man on her side, with regards to Naruto's training and development. She knew from her studies that the boy needed some sort of male role-model. The Sandaime was far too remote to serve in that role, and Iruka was far more suitable than Maito Gai. If she could not convince him of the rightness of her actions, his influence on Naruto would act counter to hers, perhaps sapping the boy's determination to succeed, and she could not have that. So she waited, observing his demeanor from the corner of her eye, and silently marshaled her arguments.

"Naruto treated me to dinner tonight," Iruka began. "He was quite proud of himself after he and two other genins fought a *jonin* ." His emphasis on the last word made it sound like a particularly vile epithet.

"They nearly stopped my heart when I realized they were not behind me," Kurenai admitted in a wry voice, visibly startling Iruka. "Like you," she continued, "I did not think they were ready for such a challenge. Usually, when I have those thoughts, I am quickly proven wrong, but I would not casually gamble with their lives. They were already moving to engage before I could stop them."

"I see," Iruka murmured. "I am glad that you were not encouraging them to take such risks. But when I asked Naruto why he was so confident, he mentioned his training schedule. Is there a reason to work the boy so hard?"

Kurenai nodded. The question was valid, and she needed to answer it if she wanted the chuunin's support. "What would he be doing if he is not training?"

Iruka started to answer, but then stopped. Kurenai knew that most genins liked to spend time with their families, or with their friends. But Naruto didn't have the first and possessed very few of the latter. It was no wonder he'd begun pulling pranks – he'd had no other way to occupy his time. Iruka sighed and changed his approach. "Aren't you afraid of burning him out with all this?"

Kurenai nodded. "If he were any other genin, I would say yes in a minute. But for the first time in his life, he has people explaining things to him, showing him exactly how to do things, and he is seeing daily progress instead of redoubled frustration." She held up her hand as Iruka scowled and opened his mouth. "I know you actually tried to help him, but you were only one of many teachers, in a place he'd already learned to associate with boredom and ridicule. I'm amazed he learned as much from you as he did, under those conditions."

Iruka nodded slowly as he seemed to consider her words with care. "But will making him stronger really make him happy?" he finally asked.

Kurenai let out a sigh of her own. "I hope so," she said with a bit more candor than she'd intended. Iruka's unexpected open-mindedness prompted a more frank response than she might have preferred. But trust was a two-way street between shinobi: it had to be given as well as received. "You know of his grand ambition?"

Iruka nodded, smiling faintly.

"The first step to achieving that goal," she said calmly, "lies in becoming as proficient a shinobi as possible, and as quickly as possible."

Iruka's eyebrows lifted in an almost comical fashion. "You really think Uzumaki Naruto will become Hokage?"

"Eventually?" Kurenai asked. "I think anything is possible. *Someone* will have to follow Sarutobi. He's very wise, but he won't live forever. I don't see any strong candidates for his successor, do you?"

Iruka slowly shook his head. "Not like the Fourth was. No one stands out the way he did."

"I think Konoha could do much worse than someone like Naruto," Kurenai said quietly. "He has a kind heart and a determination to do the right thing. I have seen this in the way he trains, and the way he treats his teammates. The only thing I am unsure of is whether he will even want to be Hokage by the time he is ready… or if he will have come to hate the village by then."

Iruka looked crestfallen as Kurenai related her experiences trying to get Naruto properly equipped. He was visibly shocked as she related the Hokage's words about the recalcitrant villagers, and how they circumvented the spirit of the Hokage's law, even while conforming to the letter. He rubbed his chin as she related what she'd learned at the bank, not even reacting when she mentioned using the interrogation genjutsu on the manager. "I will investigate this while you are gone on this patrol mission," he said absently. "Maybe I can uncover who is trying to drive Naruto from Konoha. If this action did originate on the Village Council, then the identities of the plotters should be difficult to conceal."

"That would be good to know," she agreed. She was a little surprised that he'd come around to her viewpoint so quickly. He displayed an unusual degree of mental flexibility, especially for a man.

"Well, I'd better be going. I have class in the morning, and you have a mission to prepare for," he said, standing up. "Thank you for the tea," he said formally.

"I'm glad we had this talk," she said as she led him to the front door.

With his sandals on, Iruka lingered in her doorway for a moment. He opened his mouth a couple of times, only to close it. "Please, take care of Naruto," he finally said in a small voice.

"I will do all that I can," she replied. She wished she could make a more positive reply, but past experience had shown her that good intentions and a strong will couldn't guarantee anything, no matter how desperately one might want them to.

"Good night," Iruka said in a somber voice, bowing slightly.

Kurenai watched him turn and walk off into the darkness.

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Naruto had gotten to the point where he awoke before his alarm more than half the time. Avoiding painful shocks seemed to be a more than sufficient motivator for his subconscious. He dressed quickly and hefted the heavy backpack he'd so carefully loaded the night before. Then he locked up his apartment and headed for his daily meeting with Gai-sensei and Lee.

Maito Gai had already heard about the previous day's fight, but asked that Naruto tell it again from his viewpoint. By the time the blond shinobi had finished, Lee was practically vibrating.

"Yes! Naruto-san, you have shown everyone the power of your youth!" the genin with the bowl cut shouted, leaping up with one fist punching the air.

Naruto winced and rubbed at his ear. "Yeah, I guess we did, a little," he agreed with a grin.

Lee's eyes were lit with a strange fire when he turned to his teacher. "Gai-sensei? Do you think there will be another attempt to steal the Hokage's scroll? Maybe we could patrol around the tower and catch the next one…"

Gai looked a bit alarmed at this, and Naruto quickly cleared his throat. "Er, Lee, I don't think that's such a good idea," he said quickly. "If a stealth-specialist was caught, they might send someone who's more of a generalist or heavy combat type next time. Also, remember I was with my whole team at the time, and they did a lot of the work."

"Yes!" Gai exclaimed, giving Naruto a thumbs-up. "Naruto has demonstrated that he knows the true meaning of teamwork, Lee." Then his brows lowered dramatically as he turned fully toward Lee. "He understands that a team can do far more than an individual alone. Do not seek the path of false glory, Lee! Trust your sensei to steer you correctly!"

Lee immediately burst into tears and began sobbing apologies to his teacher as Naruto broke out into a cold sweat. After two overly-passionate choruses of "Gai-sensei! Lee!" Naruto loudly cleared his throat.

The green spandex-clad shinobis looked up from their tearful embrace.

"Er, the Hokage said he's going to send us on a C-rank patrol mission now, and I need to report to the Hokage's tower by nine. I wanted to let you know that I'll be out of the village for at least a few days," Naruto said, struggling to keep his voice even.

Gai nodded thoughtfully as Lee regained his composure. "We will await your return. Try to train as much as you can while you are away. You've made good progress here, Naruto, and it would be a shame to see you lose your edge while you are gone."

Naruto barked "Hai!" and made a quick bow to the man who, however odd, had nonetheless demystified taijutsu for him.

Gai smiled at the genin. "I understand that you may have a long journey, so we will do something different today. I will discuss tactics for dealing with multiple opponents, and afterward, perhaps you can help Lee with your Kage Bunshins?"

Naruto hadn't had a chance to use any jutsu's in his matches with Lee before now, so his grin was just a bit feral. Lee looked from his sensei to his sparring partner and swallowed.

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Naruto was still smiling as he walked toward the Hokage's Tower. The lesson had been good, and he'd be thinking about what Gai said about fighting multiple opponents for a while. The tactics varied… using terrain, using your opponents themselves… but usually they involved arranging things so you only fought a few enemies at a time.

It was also fun to let Lee see him do something he was *really good* at. The genin's eyes practically popped out of his head when thirty Narutos charged him with a chorus of battle cries. Even Gai had seemed a little impressed. According to him, Naruto coordinated exceptionally well with his Bunshin. Naruto enjoyed the praise, but tried not to let it go to his head. Kurenai-sensei would be sure to notice and bring it to his attention before she deflated his ego.

Gai let him leave at eight, so he'd have plenty of time to meet with his team. Naruto reached into his pocket and hefted his frog-shaped wallet. He'd even have time for a quick breakfast, and there was still plenty of money left from running all those D-rank missions. Kurenai-sensei had been right about how the money would accumulate if they kept doing those twice a day. He was nearing his destination, his mind weighing the pros and cons of having miso soup versus grilled sardines with his rice, when he saw a familiar figure.

"Ohayo, Hinata-san," he called out, breaking into a trot. But the words of his greeting seemed to stick in his throat as he realized something was wrong.

Hyuuga Hinata, though she wasn't very dynamic in her body language, always moved with a certain grace and precision. Naruto was impressed by the way that carried over to her taijutsu, as she seemed to float when they sparred, evading his attacks with an effortless ease that he both admired and envied. Of course, the last time he tried to explain that to his teammate when he complimented her, she looked down and promised to put more effort into her sparring. Naruto didn't know if it was her ears or his mouth, but somehow every time he tried to say something nice to her, it always came out negatively.

But none of that grace and ease was evident today. His teammate stumbled along the sidewalk in a daze. Her jacket was creased like she'd slept in it, and her backpack hung off one shoulder with the ties half-undone. At the sound of Naruto's voice, she flinched and the strap slipped off her shoulder. She caught it before it slid down too far, but the top of her bag opened, spilling out a haphazard tangle of clothes, weapons, and supplies on the sidewalk.

Without even looking back, Hinata slumped to the ground, kneeling on the hard pavement as she mechanically began stuffing things back into her bag. Naruto rushed over, wondering what was wrong with his teammate.

Hinata's face was lowered, and he could barely see her nose as her lank hair hung forward across her forehead. "Hinata?" he asked cautiously.

She shook her head, but did not answer. Naruto knelt down and handed her a kunai that had skidded out of her reach. He noticed that her hands were shaking as she grasped the handle with murmured thanks.

Uzumaki Naruto would never be mistaken for a genius of perceptive talent, but even he could tell that something was wrong, drastically wrong with his teammate. He remembered old man Ichiraku's words. It was true that Hinata and Shino were becoming friends as well as teammates. But now, that once-happy thought filled him with dread. Had she somehow found out about his prisoner? No, her manner seemed more painful and despairing than fearful. She hadn't been afraid to accept the kunai from his hand, either. Naruto frowned as his thoughts chased each other around, with no clear resolution in sight. Something was wrong with his friend, and he needed to do something.

Naruto knelt down a little lower, trying to make contact with Hinata's palest lavender eyes. "Hinata-chan?" he asked nervously, and immediately swallowed.

Hinata's head jerked up like she'd been struck, and Naruto saw that she indeed had been. There was a large angry bruise on her left cheek, and another along the right side of her jaw. There were smudges of dirt here and there and dried blood near one nostril and at the corner of her mouth. The skin around Hinata's eyes was dark from fatigue, and at this range he could see tiny red blood vessels along the edges of the eyes themselves. Naruto felt his mouth drop open and Hinata immediately ducked her head back down. At least she hadn't hit him for using the familiar form of address, like Sakura used to… not that he wouldn't prefer that reaction to this, when he thought about it.

Naruto helped her gather the last of her possessions, gradually becoming aware of the increasing foot traffic around them. The merchants and shopkeepers were getting ready to start another day in Konoha, as he racked his brain for something to say. *"What happened to your face?"* or *"Why do you look like you got beat up?"* did not seem appropriate, not when he thought about that anguished look.

Hinata stuffed everything back into her bag, and painstakingly re-did the ties, even though her fingers still shook a little. Naruto fidgeted

uncomfortably while she did this, looked around, and stuck his hands into his pockets. Touching his frog-purse reminded him of his earlier debate. "Neh, Hinata? Have you had breakfast yet?" he asked cautiously.

She shook her head, but did not speak.

"Come on then," he said, in what he hoped was an encouraging tone of voice, "Ichiraku's is on the way to the Hokage's Tower, and we still have plenty of time."

Hinata's shoulders slumped, but she began trudging forward. Seeing her like this made Naruto feel anxious, almost sick in a way. Not the 'expired-milk' kind of sick, but… unsettled. "Tell you what," he said suddenly, trying to sound cheerful, "since I made you spill out your bag, I'll buy you breakfast!"

"Naruto, you don't have to do that," she said, her voice little more than a tired whisper.

There was a dead, defeated undertone to her words that Naruto had never heard from his teammate before. He didn't know why, but he found that even more alarming. "After all those times you fed me dinner?" he scoffed, trying to maintain a jocular tone, "I think I owe you more than a few breakfasts!" Seeing no reaction to his words, he leaned toward her and dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. He didn't want anyone to overhear his next words. "Actually, it's not fair even then. Overall, I think you cook better than Old Man Ichiraku does… but don't tell him I said that!" he hissed dramatically.

Hinata stumbled a little when he said that, and Naruto automatically reached out to steady her elbow. His fingers barely brushed her upper arm, but she flinched away like he'd struck her. He saw her lips press together as she tried to bite back a hiss of pain. "Hinata, are you okay?" he asked before he could stop himself.

She nodded, and then spoke when her breathing returned to normal. "I had… training last night," she said. "It was very strenuous."

"Ano," Naruto said, "didn't Kurenai-sensei say to take it easy and get to bed early last night?"

Hinata nodded. "This was a special family training session. Father had something he wanted me to learn before I left."

"Really?" Naruto asked eagerly. "Is it a new technique, or a special jutsu? Can you show me next time we practice?" He figured anything that tough to learn had to be pretty spectacular.

But Hinata just ducked her head down until she was almost completely facing the ground.

Naruto really had no idea what to say that couldn't make things worse, so he was silent until they reached Ichiraku's. The old man was polishing the counter top with a folded cloth as a fat merchant in a silk robe got up and left, leaving some coins next to his empty plate. "Hey, Naruto! One more for the road until you're off on your mission?" he asked. But his smile faded a little when he saw Naruto's companion.

They both settled on stools, though Hinata was still moving stiffly. Naruto glanced at his teammate out of the corner of his eye. "Do you know what you want?" he asked, gesturing at the menu. When Hinata didn't answer, Naruto frowned, scratching at the back of his head. Where was Kurenai-sensei when he needed someone smart to unravel the mysteries of kunoichi? "Would you like to just get what I'm having then?" he asked cautiously.

Hinata nodded wearily, seeming to droop on the stool.

"Okay, I'd like miso soup, rice balls, and pickles for both of us," he said, digging out his wallet and checking its contents. "And some of those dumplings with the bean paste for my friend," he added. He knew from the dinners that was one of her favorite treats.

"A-arigatou, Naruto-san," Hinata said in an uneven voice.

"Good morning, Naruto!" Ayame said as she emerged from the back room with a broom. She frowned a little when she saw Hinata, but Naruto had no idea why she then looked over at her father for a moment. "Hello, Hinata-san," she said after a moment. "I… er, we're planning to get some new tiles laid in back, and I was hoping I could get your opinion on the patterns. Father has his heart set on this one design, but I think it would clash horribly. I'd like to get another woman's opinion on this, since we all know men are hopeless at such things."

The old man, of course, took loud exception to this, and father and daughter began a spate of good-natured bickering that sounded like a well-rehearsed skit to Naruto's ears. Somehow, halfway through it, Ayame was on the other side of the counter, gently taking Hinata by the shoulder, and leading the weakly protesting girl away.

"I'll watch your bag," Naruto volunteered, helping her ease the strap off her shoulder.

Minus the weight, Hinata seemed to straighten up a bit more. Naruto knew she must have been very tired for it to have affected her so much – her arm and leg weights had been added to several times after Kurenai had procured a set of braces that would fit the slim girl's wrists and ankles.

Naruto fidgeted as the old man prepared their food. It wasn't that he didn't believe Hinata so much as that he suspected she wasn't telling him everything. He needed to see 'underneath the underneath' but he didn't have any idea what he should be looking for in this situation. He frowned as he tried to think, but nothing seemed to make sense to him.

"What happened to your friend?" the old man asked in a low voice as he began to lay out the porcelain squares with their food.

"I wish I knew," Naruto said in a miserable voice. He was getting really sick of being confused and always doing the wrong thing.

"Well, I think Ayame is helping her get cleaned up a bit. One thing I have learned being married and raising a daughter: A woman having a rough day will feel twice as bad if she looks rough as well," the old man confided.

"Arigatou," Naruto said gratefully. Ayame was a girl, so maybe Hinata's problem, whatever it was, would make sense to her.

"Think nothing of it," the old man said in grand voice. "A good chef knows to take care of his regular customers! Besides," he added, "you kids are good people. If I could make a living just cooking for shinobi, I'd ban those cheap, whiny, self-satisfied merchants from here in a minute. Just don't tell them I said that, at least until I retire."

The old man's rant brought a smile to Naruto's lips, and he began to relax a little and had a sip of his tea.

A few minutes later, Ayame's voice came echoing from the back of the ramen stand. "I think you are right about the patterns, Hinata-san! If we use that design, but reverse the colors, it won't look so bad, and it won't overpower everything else."

When she led the girl back around to the front, even Naruto could see the changes. Hinata's hair was a little damp, and had been recently brushed. Her face was clean, and the bruises seemed much fainter than they had earlier. While she still had dark circles around them, her eyes didn't seem to be as red, either. When she sat down, she still wouldn't meet Naruto's eyes, but she didn't seem as beaten down as before.

Her eyes darted toward Naruto's chopsticks, poised above his untouched food, and she ducked her head in apology. "Gomen, Naruto, I did not mean to make you wait to eat."

Naruto snorted. "Kurenai-sensei has been trying to teach me manners. It's hard enough to remember the complicated things, so I might as well do the simple ones right, eh?" He smiled at his

teammate, but she did not look up. "Well, now that you're here. Itadakimasu!"

With that, they started breakfast. Naruto noticed that Hinata, for once, was eating almost as quickly as he was. He wondered if that 'special training' had made her miss supper, as well as breakfast. He also wondered if he should ask Kurenai-sensei about this 'special family training', especially if they were going to make Hinata do it right before a potentially dangerous mission. The formerly-dormant part of his brain that he'd discovered during their team's first mission planning exercise decided that Hinata was probably at less than fifty percent of her normal effectiveness. If they ran into problems, he'd have to make sure he was backing her up immediately. As tired and sore as she was, he doubted she'd be able to defend herself for long in a real fight.

Fortunately, the food seemed to restore her a bit as well, and she was able to shoulder her bag without straining as they prepared to leave. Naruto left the money on the counter, along with a large tip for Ayame. The old man's eyes darted toward Hinata as she adjusted the straps on her bag. "You two come back safe," he said gruffly.

"We will," Naruto assured him.

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Kurenai was pleased to see her genins already waiting for her as she approached the Hokage's Tower for their assignment. The horror stories she'd heard from Asuma and the others about irresponsible students seemed to be just that – stories. She smirked. Or maybe they took after their jonins, at least in Asuma's case. Team ten had done less than a third as many missions as team eight, and Kurenai had yet to see them do any really serious training. Asuma-baka was relying far too much on the Akimichi-Yamanaka-Nara synergy and not enough on hard work and preparation.

Kurenai's musing cut off as she approached the bench. Shino was standing next to it, staring at her. Naruto was sitting, as was Hinata.

Or more accurately, Naruto was sitting there, petrified. Hinata was *asleep* , her head resting on her teammate's shoulder.

While one part of her found the scene to be rather cute, and wished she'd had a camera to record the moment, for the most part she was concerned. This was not normal behavior for the kunoichi, who always took care to ensure she was prepared for the day's activities. Had she and Naruto ignored her orders about getting a full night's sleep and decided to train anyway? Was she sick? If the latter was true, they'd have to delay their mission or leave her in Konoha. Either outcome would not be good for the girl.

For that matter, Naruto looked unusually nervous as well. Did he know something? Or was he partially to blame for her condition? Kurenai pondered things she'd been hoping to put off for a while when she noticed a far simpler and more likely cause. Of the people walking past the bench, shinobi and villagers alike, a fair proportion were giving the boy a dirty look, like he'd done something wrong. That probably accounted for his guilty expression – or at least she hoped it did.

Kurenai came to stand before her students. It took no more than a raised eyebrow to get Naruto talking in a strained whisper. She noted that, despite his agitation, he took great pains not to move his shoulder a millimeter as he talked.

"I ran into Hinata after I left Gai-sensei and Lee. She was really tired and could barely walk. When I said hello she dropped her bag and I had to help pick her stuff up. She'd said she had to do some special training with her family. I think they kept her up all night. We had some time, so I bought her breakfast at Ichiraku's. From the way she ate I don't think she'd had anything to eat since lunch yesterday. When we got here, we were still a little early, so we sat down to wait, and next thing I know she's asleep on my shoulder, and honest, I didn't do anything!" the blond genin whispered, without pausing for breath.

Kurenai held up her palm to forestall any further explanations. Naruto might pass out from oxygen deprivation if he continued. "You did the right thing, Naruto," she reassured him.

"This 'family training' is quite troubling," Shino said.

Kurenai wondered if he really meant 'troublesome' instead, since it could interfere with their mission. But then she looked at the expressionless boy and remembered how seldom he misspoke himself. It was good to see he wasn't as cold and uncaring on the inside as he appeared on the outside. "I agree," she replied, nodding. "I hope she isn't coming down with something," she said as she carefully rested the back of her hand against the girl's forehead.

The skin was cool at first, but at the slight touch Hinata's eyes popped open and she made a small, indistinct noise as she stiffened. A moment later her forehead threatened to scorch the back of Kurenai's hand as her face was enveloped in a rosy blush. "G-gomen!" the girl squeaked as she almost leaped away from Naruto and stood at attention.

Kurenai smiled down at the girl, even as she seethed inside. Special Family Training, was it? Hiashi should have been proud of what his daughter had accomplished yesterday. Was he so personally invested in her being a failure that he'd punish her for attempting to grow beyond it? Even with all she knew of the man, it seemed impossible. Well, monstrous people did monstrous things, and she already knew of one, even if she lacked the proof. But Hinata was not her father. Revenge against one did not justify injustice toward the other. Perhaps, even, the opposite was true, and one would require the other? That would remain to be seen, as it depended on another's strength… and right now she appeared to be a very slender reed indeed.

Nonetheless, Kurenai smiled down at her subordinate. "Hinata, I am glad you still made it here, even if you are not feeling well. Your determination not to miss this mission briefing is noted and

appreciated. I see that it is five minutes before the hour, are you ready to proceed?"

Hinata nodded, ducking her head. Naruto just looked confused, and Kurenai hoped he didn't interpret Hinata leaping away from him as a rejection. She squeezed the bridge of her nose as Hinata and Naruto moved toward their appointment. When she looked up, she saw Shino, and had the oddest impression that he was smiling at her behind his high collar.

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Hinata looked down and concentrated on placing her feet correctly. She would not stumble and humiliate herself further. Fortunately, the meal and the brief rest had temporarily restored some of her energy, and she moved with much greater ease.

Thinking about that 'brief rest' brought heat rushing back to her cheeks. She didn't know what had possessed her to do that. They'd arrived at the tower with fifteen minutes to spare, so Naruto suggested they sit on one of the benches. The morning sunlight was warm, and combined with her fatigue and the fine breakfast she'd just eaten, she hadn't stood a prayer of staying awake. But why did she have to wake up leaning on Naruto? Of course, if she'd leaned the other way she might have toppled over, or even fallen off the bench, but that might have been preferable. At least he hadn't complained or shoved her off of him. Naruto was too nice to do that anyway.

For that matter, why was *everyone* being so nice to her? First Naruto, stopping to help her with her things, and even calling her 'Hinata-chan' at one point, though she thought her ears were probably deceiving her, telling her what she wanted to hear. Instead of losing patience with her bumbling, he'd even offered to buy her breakfast! That was almost like a date, in a way, since he even paid for her food. It wasn't really like that – he'd just offered to pay her back for the dinners she'd shared with him – but if it had been Uchiha Sasuke who'd bought her breakfast, Hinata knew that most of the village girls her age would have been wishing for her violent

death. So even if it wasn't a *real* date, it had to count for something, didn't it?

And then Ayame-onee-san, on the pretext of asking her about the tiles, had taken her into Ichiraku's small back area and bathroom and helped her get cleaned up. To her horror, the first thing the older girl had asked her was if Naruto had put the bruises on her face. The angry look on the young woman's face nearly reduced her to tears, and she knew she was babbling a little as she assured her that Naruto had done no such thing. She didn't want Naruto to be blamed for her condition, not by some of the only adults in Konoha that didn't seem to hate him for no reason. Even when they sparred, she could tell Naruto was fairly careful not to hurt her. Father and Neji did not choose to coddle her that way.

Once Ayame reassured her that she believed the kunoichi, she helped her get cleaned up, and even showed her how to minimize the bruises with a light dusting of makeup. Hinata had never worn cosmetics like that before, and was amazed at the difference when she looked in the mirror. As they finished, Ayame ran her comb under the tap and used it to smooth out her hair. Hinata was too tired to continue protesting the kind girl's ministrations. Having someone else tend to her hair was unexpectedly soothing, something that brought back happier memories of her mother. So she was a little off guard when Ayame asked her *that* question.

"You like him, don't you?" she asked.

Hinata's eyes flew open with an audible snap. "G-gomen?" she stammered.

"Naruto. You like him, don't you?" Ayame asked with a smile.

"A-ano…" Hinata temporized, her embarrassment warring with the relaxing feel of the comb in her hair.

"Father told me about the way you told off that Sakura girl who insulted him," Ayame continued. "He's a good kid, and it's nice to see

someone his age who will stand up for him. He deserves better than he gets, doesn't he?"

"Hai!" Hinata agreed, but when she tried to elaborate, her tongue refused to move as she felt her cheeks heat up again.

"All done," Ayame said. "Doesn't that look better?" she asked, gesturing toward the small mirror.

"Arigatou," Hinata said, nodding.

"You're welcome. Just back me up when I speak to my father," Ayame answered with a smile. "That man has no taste whatsoever."

As they made their way back toward the front area, Ayame added quietly. "You know, Naruto's always been a little low on money. You and his old teacher, Iruka, are the only people I've ever seen him buy a meal for…"

Of course that made it even harder for her to eat, despite her hunger. Naruto shouldn't be spending his money on her! But when she arrived the meal was already prepared and her protests died on her lips when she saw him smiling.

And then Ayame's father had wished them both a safe return, and she could see his sincerity, beyond his concern about losing a regular customer… and it extended to her, as well.

Why was everyone being so nice to the Hyuuga reject? Her own father couldn't stand her constant failures, so why were complete strangers being so kind? Was it pity? Were her shortcomings so obvious that people who didn't know her would feel sorry for her?

Hinata felt her stomach turn over in disgust and self-loathing as they climbed the stairs. No more. Her brows knitted as an unaccustomed expression drew over her features. She was tired of being a failure, and she would do whatever it took to change. It was her weakness

that Father hated, that Father punished, so she would cut it out of her if she needed to.

But her rebellious eyes glanced over at Naruto, and Hinata wondered if she would really be able to do it.

A/N: The next chapter is already in progress – I decided to split this up before it became overly large.

Please stop asking me if this story had been discontinued. If I ever have to completely stop working on this story, I will post my outline so you all can see how it ends.

While it has been a while since the last update, chapter four was monster-sized, and I've also been building toward the climax of year 2 in Harry Potter and the Nightmares of Futures Past. I *generally* plan to alternate between the two stories, but if I only feel inspired to work on the one that just updated, I'm not going to stare at my keyboard and be unproductive.

By the way, OoOoO is my new experiment in imbedded scene breaks. Let's see how long until that gets filtered out as well.

Please address any questions or concerns to my yahoo group, Viridian Dreams. The link is in my Author Profile.

-Matthew

# The Journey to the Borderlands

Chapter 6

Naruto kept an eye on Hinata as they ascended the Hokage's Tower. She seemed a lot steadier than before, which was good, but he didn't want to take any chances either.

He also studiously avoided making any sort of eye contact with Shino. He was pretty sure the damn bug-user had been silently laughing at him since he'd arrived at the base of the tower that morning. He'd looked down at Naruto and the sleeping Hinata without saying a single word. Finally Naruto had whispered "She's really tired," as quietly as he could.

"I can see," Shino replied, deadpan.

Unfortunately, with that high collar, Naruto couldn't see the boy's mouth to be sure. Nonetheless, he silently promised himself to kick the larger boy's butt the next time they sparred.

And to top off the day's weirdness, his shoulder still felt warm where her head had rested on it.

At least the chuunin guarding the Hokage's office had retained their attitude adjustment from the previous day – though Naruto wondered if that would necessarily have been true if Kurenai-sensei hadn't been bringing up the rear.

At least he knew the Hokage's smile wasn't feigned when they entered his office. "Hmmm," he murmured as they stood at attention before his desk. He held out a pair of scrolls for Kurenai. "The scroll with the blue seal contains the details of your assignment. You will be patrolling that section of the border with Earth Country for three weeks, starting three days from now. That should allow you plenty of time to travel and familiarize yourself with the area. The scroll with

the red seal is to be presented to the leader of the team currently in place, a jonin named Dariketsu."

"We're relieving Dariketsu's team?" Kurenai asked, her voice holding a little edge.

"Yes," the Hokage answered, gesturing at the jonin with his pipe. "Do you know him?"

Kurenai nodded. "In passing. I am… surprised… he was put in charge of such a sensitive location."

The old man grunted, and a rueful expression passed over his face, disappearing so quickly Naruto wondered if he'd imagined it. "There have been a few incidents lately. Skirmishes that seemed to straddle the line between our two countries. It's never really clear which side of the border it started on, so there have been messy diplomatic repercussions. There are a lot of people over there that are still angry about a war fought before your genins were born. To give our envoy to Earth something to use, he can now inform them that Dariketsu's team of combat veterans has been replaced with a genin team, and request that they reciprocate. I'm explaining this because I want all of you to adopt a very… flexible approach to border intrusions."

"You want us to just let anyone through?" Naruto asked in disbelief.

"No," the Hokage said firmly as he shook his head. "But I do want you to make sure that if you intercept someone, it happens in a location that makes it *very* clear who violated who's border."

Naruto frowned as he puzzled out his leader's words. "So you want us to make sure the other side gets the blame if there's a fight?"

The Hokage nodded. "Yes, although I hope there won't be any confrontations, especially if Earth stands down their patrol as well."

Kurenai spoke up again. "We will make sure we always patrol a few kilometers back from the actual border, so any confrontations will occur on Fire territory."

The Hokage nodded. "Very well. Good luck and I will see you in about three and a half weeks. Your relief will have a scroll with a red seal like that one. Do not accept messages from anyone who does not have such a scroll. Understood?"

They all nodded, and with that they left the Hokage's office. Starting his first C-ranked mission, Naruto wanted to jump into the air and shout "Yatta!", but two things stopped him. The first was Kurenai's lectures to her team about proper decorum. Hinata already seemed familiar with all the rules, and while Shino appeared mildly interested, Naruto figured they were aimed primarily at him. The other was Hinata's condition, the reasons for which he did not fully understand.

Team Eight moved through the streets of Konoha at a quick walk, heading for the nearest gate. Stepping through the portal wasn't anything they hadn't already done dozens of times, but somehow it felt different. He nervously adjusted the kunai holster on his right leg, and resisted the urge to pull one out and twirl it by the ring at the end of the handle.

They were on the trade road that led to Earth Country for over two hours before Kurenai called for a break. Naruto was still full of energy, but he noticed Hinata was faltering. Her apparent lack of rest the previous night was catching up with her. She slipped her bag off her shoulders, sat down at the base of a tree, and leaned back, closing her eyes.

Naruto frowned and sat down next to his teammate. "You may want to take your arm and leg weights off, if you're still wearing them," he said quietly.

Hinata started at the sound of his voice, eyes popping open again. After a moment she self-consciously grasped her forearm through

the sleeve of her jacket. "A-ano, that is all right, Naruto."

Naruto frowned. "But if you are tired, it might help," he said reasonably.

Hinata smiled. "But then I will just have more weight to carry in my bag."

Naruto shrugged. "We can stick them in my pack. I didn't stay up all night, and I missed having you Jyuuken the crap out of me last night."

Hinata smiled wearily, and Naruto thought he heard a small snort of laughter. Her hand tightened around her sleeve again. "Seriously, Naruto, I will be all right. I won't improve if I don't keep the weights on, will I?"

"Well," Naruto said slowly, "it depends. Gai-sensei said that if you overuse the muscles in your arms and legs, you sometimes have to leave the weights off until you recover." Of course, the stabbing pains and muscle tears the man described to Naruto never seemed to last longer than a few minutes. But then again, he probably hadn't ever really hurt himself that way.

Hinata looked thoughtful. "I am a bit sore, but not in that way. I should probably keep them on," she said firmly. Then she looked down at the ground between her legs. "I appreciate your concern," she added politely.

Naruto found himself scratching at the back of his head again. "Er, yeah. Well, you're my teammate after all," he said. For some reason her shoulders slumped after he said that. "And you're really fun to spar with," he added. Hinata nodded without looking up and Naruto decided to go see Kurenai-sensei before he said something stupid again.

Kurenai did not want to make Hinata any more self-conscious than necessary, so she was subtle in her attempts to keep an eye on the girl. She took note of the Hyuuga's condition using her peripheral vision, and always when something else seemed to draw her attention. Naruto and Shino's concern for their teammate was more obvious, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Kurenai hoped that the boys' concern would make an impression on the girl. Naruto was as obvious as he was sincere, a felicitous combination in this situation.

After a couple of hours on the trade road, Kurenai called for a quick break. Hinata's fatigue was becoming more and more apparent with every step, and it didn't surprise her that Hinata, after a brief conversation with Naruto, had fallen asleep leaning against a tree.

Naruto walked toward Kurenai as she fished her canteen out of her pack and took a small swallow. He had an uncharacteristically grim look on his face, displacing his normal smile. "She's exhausted," he said quietly. "I don't think her father should have insisted on her training all night."

Kurenai bit back the first couple of things she wanted to say, and settled for just nodding her agreement.

The blond genin opened his mouth like he had more to say, but after a moment he just closed it, shaking his head as he walked off toward Shino. He deliberately scuffed his feet on the ground, kicking any loose pebbles or twigs in his path, and Kurenai didn't need any special jutsu to read his frustration.

Ten minutes later, after they'd all had a drink and refreshed themselves, they were ready to resume their journey, but the girl was still sound asleep.

Kurenai was contemplating how best to wake her charge when Naruto and Shino walked up to their teammate in a fairly matter-of-fact manner. Naruto picked up Hinata's bag and handed it to Shino, who in turn locked the straps with his own pack.

Naruto turned back to his teammate and visibly swallowed. Then he quickly bent over and wrapped one arm around Hinata's legs, loosely grasping her shoulder with his other hand. He carefully straightened up and Hinata was neatly folded over his shoulder, still sleeping.

Kurenai recognized the Academy-taught method for carrying a wounded comrade who was stable enough to travel, but unable to walk on their own. What amazed the jonin was the fact that the girl slept through the entire process. That could only indicate acute fatigue, combined with almost total chakra depletion. It was surprising she made it as far as she did, Kurenai decided.

Naruto turned toward his sensei and slowly nodded. "I'm ready," he said quietly.

Kurenai frowned. Naruto was holding himself a little stiffly, and she remembered that he was wearing weights on his arms and legs as well. "Are you sure about this, Naruto?"

The boy nodded carefully. "It'll be good training, I think."

Kurenai wondered if he'd been spending too much time with Gai and Lee.

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Hinata awoke feeling painfully stiff.

She blinked up at the ceiling wondering how she'd arrived. The last thing she remembered was taking a short break on the side of the road, but now she appeared to be in a room of some sort.

Attempting to sit up was a mistake, she immediately realized, as her abused muscles punished her mercilessly. Her body felt stiff as a board, but far more tender. She stifled a low moan.

"Ah, you are awake," a voice said in the darkened room.

Hinata's fingers slowly formed the seals under the coverlet as she whispered "Byakugan." She released her blood limit as soon as she sensed Kurenai-sensei was the only other person in the room.

"None of that!" Kurenai said sharply, making Hinata twitch painfully. "Your reserves are still very low," she continued in a kindlier tone. "Kindly restrict your chakra usage until you have fully recovered."

"G-gomen," Hinata stammered, her face flushing.

"Now, regarding this 'special family training' of yours…" Kurenai began, letting her voice trail off. "Is there anything you'd like to tell me?" she finally asked.

"No, Sensei," Hinata replied quietly.

"Hinata, I put you to bed," her teacher said in a chiding tone, "I saw. You were covered with bruises and abrasions. Your chakra was so low, I was amazed you could even move, let alone walk for two hours! What kind of training leaves you incapacitated?"

Hinata opened her mouth to answer, but then closed it. "I am not permitted to discuss certain things with people outside my family," she finally said.

Kurenai sighed. "Be that as it may, you are still a ninja on active duty with the Leaf. As such, you are required to keep yourself in good health and that does not include letting yourself become disabled when you know you have a mission the next day."

"Gomen, Sensei, I told…" Hinata began, but then swallowed her next words. It was shameful to spout excuses for her failures and shortcomings.

"You told your father, didn't you?" Kurenai asked in a shrewd tone. "Remember, Hinata, I was there when you left for the academy. Your father makes no secret of his contempt for the other shinobi of the village."

Hinata's only response was a choked sound.

"Do not apologize for matters over which you have no control, Hinata," Kurenai continued in a kindlier voice. Then her voice changed, becoming more formal in tone. "But I will require you to refuse any training or exercises that could compromise your ability to participate in our missions. As your jonin, I have the authority to do that. Your responsibility is to convey that directive to your father if the situation ever arises again."

Hinata inhaled sharply at the thought of how such a conversation would go.

As if reading her thoughts, Kurenai sighed. "I know that will not be easy for you, but if something like this happens again, either you or your father will have to answer for it. If, after explaining my orders, you are still… forced… then it will not be your fault. Do you understand?"

Hinata nodded slowly, ignoring the ache. But the thought of refusing her father filled her with dread.

"Good…. And Hinata, if you ever need to… well, my door is open if you need to talk after we return to Konoha. This inn will be serving dinner soon if you are hungry. Your uniform is next to you on the floor. I'm going to go look in on Naruto and Shino." The door slid aside, and then back, and Hinata knew she was alone.

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Shino was limping slightly as he followed his teammate back to the inn. They were only a day's travel from the border with Earth, so their jonin decided to spend the extra day at a road-side inn that typically served merchants traveling between Fire Country and Earth Country.

Of course, sitting still for a day did not appeal to Naruto. Immediately after breakfast he began urging them to train. Kurenai wanted to keep an eye on the still-sleeping Hinata, so Shino followed Naruto out into the woods to spar.

Naruto had evidently needed to work out some of his agitation and frustration regarding their teammate, because Shino couldn't recall ever getting the excrement kicked out of him this badly since he'd started at the Konoha Ninja Academy.

Fortunately, the blond genin remembered to pull his punches, so Shino only had some mild contusions to add to his puzzled embarrassment. The boy's speed had increased to a remarkable degree, and the power behind his blocks and counters threatened to knock the larger boy out of his stances every time they clashed.

This isn't to say that the bug-user hadn't gotten in a few shots of his own, one of which he'd inadvertently landed at full force when Naruto tried to duck under it and go for a sweep. The result was a small mouse under the blonde's left eye, and a throbbing wrist that bothered Shino more and more as the adrenalin wore off. The blow barely fazed his opponent, who merely came to his feet after a backwards roll and nodded acknowledgment of the point.

The changes wrought in Naruto's fighting style by his supplemental training were all too apparent to Shino. Gone were the awkward, exaggerated versions of the basic taijutsu stances. Naruto's footing was now sure and his movements exceptionally fluid. His attacks and counters were less straight-forward and more circular in motion.

Naruto still favored attacking from unusual directions, but his dependence on the terrain had lessened. He didn't hesitate to launch himself into the air for a flying kick, confident that his speed would allow him to complete the move without being caught in the air. Indeed, the one time Shino managed to catch one of Naruto's high kicks, the genin simply twisted in mid-air and used a scissoring motion to bring his *other* heel crashing into the side of the Kikai-nin's head.

The worst part was that Naruto had done all this with nearly half of Shino's colony attached to his back, steadily draining chakra until they let go, replete. That was something he'd rarely seen an individual Kikai bug do, let alone dozens of them at once. The

amount of chakra they'd drained from the boy was amazing. The worst part of all was that Naruto didn't even seem to have noticed.

Shino frowned at Naruto's back as he followed the boy back to the inn. Chakra reserves that large were rare in a jonin, let alone a genin. Could it be linked to the mystery surrounding Naruto that his father was forbidden to discuss? His mind worked furiously as Naruto, still energized from the sparring, babbled happily about a dozen topics at once. The only thing that came to mind was his father's words about relying on first-hand observations. Listening to his teammate wonder if Hinata was awake yet and if he could talk the cook into serving ramen, Shino decided to do just that.

For now.

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Naruto bounced in his seat as he waited for their food to arrive. Sparring with Shino had really woken up his appetite, especially since he'd actually held his own against his taller teammate.

He was also happy to discover that the inn's proprietors, a middle-aged couple who apparently rarely visited Konoha, didn't seem to be aware of his prisoner and treated him so nicely it was a little disconcerting. The wife, who ran the kitchen, kept patting him on the head and saying how he reminded her of her son. She was quite a good cook, and boasted experience in many regional cuisines, so she seemed a little disconcerted when her favorite guest asked for ramen. Normally, she said, such a dish was a bit beneath her talents, but she couldn't seem to say no when Naruto smiled and bowed apologetically with his palms together.

Naruto was working on his second bowl, trying to puzzle out the unusual spices the nice old lady had mixed into the broth, when a voice coming from behind him almost made him fall to the floor.

"Ramen again?" Kurenai asked in a disapproving tone.

"Er, yeah," Naruto said, ducking his head as he turned toward his sensei. "I'm going without for three weeks as it is," he continued in a slightly petulant tone.

Kurenai sighed. "Three weeks of trail rations and whatever we can gather on our own. All the more reason to eat nutritious food when you have the opportunity, Naruto. Not just bowl after bowl of noodles."

"I do not think there is any danger of Naruto becoming malnourished at this inn," Shino observed. "Not after the breakfast he was served."

Naruto turned back and glared across the table at his teammate. "You're just mad because Obasan almost swatted one of your bugs when she saw it on your shoulder."

"The reckless slaughter of innocent and productive creatures is not something to take lightly," Shino insisted in a frosty tone. "She might have been more careful in her judgment if she had not been distracted attempting to sate your appetite."

Naruto stuck his lower lip out and scowled at his teammate. "I didn't ask her to do that! It's just, every time she came out of the kitchen and she saw my plate was empty, she put more food on it." He shrugged. "Maybe she had a lot of food that was about to go bad or something."

Shino didn't respond to that, but Naruto did hear the muted buzzing that sometimes occurred when his teammate was displeased about something. Naruto figured it was his bugs reacting, but he really didn't want to think too much about that.

Kurenai sat down next to Shino, and soon the cook was taking her dinner order as well. With a warm smile at Naruto, the older woman bustled back to her kitchen to prepare the jonin's food. It had been a long time since Naruto had actively wondered what it would be like to have a mother. Normally, he was too busy for such thoughts, which was at least partially intentional.

But now, waiting for Hinata to recover so they could resume their journey, Naruto had an unusually large amount of time on his hands. He found himself thinking more and more about the innkeepers' reactions. What would it be like to live in a village where everyone treated him like that? Konoha was his home, but what would it be like to not have people glaring at him all the time, praying for his death, or telling their children to stay away from that Uzumaki brat.

Those thoughts made him *very* uncomfortable, and he tried to suppress them without much success. Then he followed Kurenai's advice from several weeks ago, and tried to logically examine his options. If he tried to move to another village, his new neighbors would want to know why. If they ever found out he had a demon bound within his stomach, Naruto knew his welcome would expire soon afterwards. Even if he came up with a believable story, he'd still need to be able to make a living. He knew a little about being a ninja, but not much else. He couldn't join another Hidden Village as a shinobi for several reasons. One, he'd be hunted down as a missing-nin by the Konoha ANBU squads. Two, his new employers would probably be able to detect that stupid damn fox and he'd be back at square one with everyone fearing and hating him. Three, eventually he'd be sent on a mission where he'd have to fight one of his former classmates. While he wouldn't mind kicking Sasuke's butt, having to fight Shino, Lee, or Hinata for real was not something he could even consider without going into a cold sweat.

No, he was stuck with Konoha in much the same way Konoha was stuck with him. A small, perverse corner of his mind was pleased by that. It would make becoming the Hokage even sweeter. With a smile, he re-addressed himself to the oddly-seasoned ramen. But after a couple of bites, he noticed that everyone else was staring at something immediately to his left. He quickly swallowed and turned his head as well.

Hinata, a little pale and unsteady, was easing herself onto the bench next to him.

Naruto almost reached out to steady her, but something made him hesitate. Remembering her insistence that she could carry her own bag and wear her weights despite her exhaustion, he realized that trying to help her might make her feel even more self-conscious. So he refrained, and wondered if he was actually getting smarter about such things. Or was his sudden intuition merely dumb luck?

"Gomen," Hinata said quietly. "You were right, Naruto," she continued in a subdued voice, "about the weights, and everything."

Naruto just shrugged at his teammate, wondering if something else was wrong. "I'm just glad you're feeling better," he said. "I missed you." Naruto coughed suddenly as Hinata's eyes widened. "I mean, I missed sparring with you. Last night. You know. Like we always do," he added quickly.

Hinata just nodded her agreement, looking downward the entire time.

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The next day, they were back on the road again, bright and early. Naruto was still a little groggy and yawned frequently for the first hour. The pallets they'd slept on were far softer than he was used to, so he had trouble sleeping at night.

Surprisingly, the innkeeper's wife got up early as well, to send them on their way with a good breakfast. Catching Kurenai's look, Naruto made sure to thank her and let her know how much he appreciated her efforts. The way the older lady just beamed at him made him feel very strange, and he found himself blushing as they left. After they left the inn, Kurenai-sensei walked beside him for a while, and thanked him for not taking advantage of the cook's friendliness.

Naruto frowned at his sensei. "Why would I do that?" he asked.

Kurenai smiled thinly. "Why indeed. She doesn't act like most of the other villagers you've known. I talked to her briefly the day before.

Her son, a boy you bear a passing resemblance to, went to Konoha several years ago to attend the Ninja Academy."

"Really?" Naruto asked. "What rank is he now? Have we met him?"

"He died during his chuunin exam," Kurenai answered in a somber tone.

Naruto tripped over his own feet. "Oh," he said as he stumbled for a moment.

"I will admit," Kurenai continued, "that I was slightly concerned that you might… inadvertently… take advantage of the situation. But aside from asking her to make ramen for you," she continued, making him duck his head a little, "your behavior was entirely appropriate."

"I didn't think it was that big a deal," Naruto grumbled. "She did ask me what my favorite food was."

Kurenai nodded at that. "As I said, I am glad you did not take advantage of the situation."

Naruto scratched the back of his head. "Ano… Sensei, if I do that when people are nice to me, won't that encourage them to treat me like everyone else does?"

Kurenai nodded. "Very good, Naruto. You are thinking ahead and considering the consequences of your actions."

Naruto found his face reddening again. Kurenai nodded at him, and then turned to speak with Shino. Naruto took that as his cue to speed up a little so he was walking beside Hinata.

A good dinner, during which the nice old lady tried to stuff the weary kunoichi with as much food as she could hold, and another full night's sleep had restored most of Hinata's energy. She was still moving a little slower than normal, but she was out on point this

morning, periodically activating her blood-limit to do quick scans of the area around them.

They walked together in a silence that was actually fairly comfortable. Naruto wondered if concentrating on the woods around them, scanning for an ambush, kept his teammate too busy to get nervous. They hadn't discussed exactly how Hinata had been transported to the inn, and he wasn't about to bring up *that* subject any time soon.

Naruto wasn't completely sure why he'd been the one to carry the girl. Of course, if there was danger, it would be better if their jonin was unburdened. But he couldn't say for sure if that had even occurred to him at the time. What he did know was that her arm and leg weights were contributing to her fatigue, and she wouldn't even have been wearing them if he hadn't shown his off. He realized that seeing her exhausted and full of pain made him feel worse than he would if it had been himself. He wondered if this was what it was like to have friends, this feeling that you'd rather be hurt yourself than see them in pain.

In a sudden flash of insight, Naruto understood why they'd been taught that shinobi should avoid friendships and close personal relationships with their comrades. The thought of his friend being hurt, or even killed, made him feel physically ill, like he'd drunk all the bad milk in Konoha in one sitting. But why had Kurenai-sensei urged him to become friends with his teammates?

Then Naruto remembered his role in the team. He was supposed to cover their escape if they were ambushed or overrun. In that situation, he supposed it was… *useful* … if he cared a lot about his teammates. Naruto glanced back at his sensei. Had she pushed him to make friends so he would be more likely to sacrifice himself for them?

That was a very uncomfortable thought, and it made Naruto feel very cold inside. He'd come to value Kurenai-sensei's wisdom and all the things she'd taught him. The idea that she was doing so just to

manipulate him… but she hadn't really, had she? He needed to think this through, the way she'd taught him.

Naruto recalled their first conversation at Moritake's. She'd already explained his role on Team Eight, and asked him how hard he was willing to work to achieve his long-term goals. She hadn't really concealed anything from him, and her expectations were straightforward. If she really was just trying to get rid of the Kyuubi like the other villagers wanted, she wouldn't have set up extra training for him, now would she? Naruto admitted to himself that when he first became a genin, his taijutsu had been awful. Training with Gai-sensei and Lee, he was *much* more likely to survive any situation they got into.

Naruto also remembered a conversation he'd had with the Hokage, many years ago, when the old man explained how the Hokage was the shinobi who protected everyone in the village, with his wisdom as well as his strength. That was the day that Naruto decided that *he* would become the Hokage some day. No one could ignore his existence then… Were his current duties all that much different? True, Kurenai-sensei was doing most of the thinking here, but wasn't it Naruto's job to help protect his teammates? Wasn't that just like what the Hokage did? Or at least a little bit like it? Maybe he was trying to see 'underneath the underneath' when there was no real underneath to see.

Naruto tried to think his way through this question as the sun climbed steadily in the sky. Around noon-time, Kurenai called a halt so they could eat some trail mix and drink from their canteens. Seeing as how there was no stream nearby, she also showed them a new jutsu for permanently summoning small amounts of water by collecting the humidity present in the ground and air around them.

Naruto was eager to learn any new jutsus he could, and watched Kurenai slowly form the seals with eager eyes. Hinata and Shino both performed the simple jutsu without much trouble, while Naruto frantically practiced the seals.

When it was his turn, Naruto was a little nervous, but managed to form the seals correctly as he said "Suiton: Condensation!" However, instead of a two-inch-wide spinning vortex of air appearing over the mouth of his canteen, Naruto summoned one nearly a foot across. The torrent of water that gushed down out of it not only filled his canteen, but it also knocked it over and splattered their sandals and pant-legs with mud. At the same time, the air became extremely parched, stinging his throat.

Naruto managed to grab his canteen before all the water poured out, and then smiled sheepishly at his teammates as they tried to shake the spattered mud off their legs.

Neither Shino nor Hinata said anything, but Kurenai finally broke the silence. "Should I assume that was an accident, Naruto? Or was that intentional?" she asked in a dry tone.

"I wouldn't prank-" Naruto said and cut himself off. He'd been about to say he wouldn't prank Hinata since she was just now feeling better, but she probably wouldn't appreciate hearing that. "Not during a mission, Sensei," he said in a formal tone.

"I see," Kurenai replied. "Well, I think it's safe to say that did not manifest as intended. Do you know why?"

Naruto shrugged, a little frustrated and embarrassed, but did not answer.

"A-ano," Hinata said, breaking the silence.

"Yes, Hinata?" Kurenai asked.

"Naruto… he always tries his best," the girl mumbled, looking down as a blush slowly crept up her cheeks. Naruto noticed her fingers clutching the hem of her jacket and he wondered why she was so tense. "He... probably put too much chakra into the jutsu," she finally said, lifting her head a little. "It didn't go wrong, not really. He just gathered too much water for the canteen to hold."

Naruto stared at his teammate, gratified that she wasn't rubbing it in. Really, she was just saying that he did it *too* well. He was still staring at her when she looked up, and her head shot back down so fast Naruto wondered if he'd just imagined it.

"That was a very astute observation, Hinata," Kurenai said approvingly. "Naruto," the jonin continued, "when using a jutsu, especially for the first time, it's a good idea to use just the minimum amount of chakra to complete it."

Naruto frowned and scratched his head, forgetting for the moment that his hand was wet and a little muddy. "How do I know how much to use?" he asked, puzzled.

Kurenai blinked. "As you complete the seals, you should feel a draining sensation as the jutsu attempts to draw the necessary chakra. Release just enough chakra for the draining sensation to stop, and no more."

"Draining sensation?" Naruto asked quizzically. "What do you mean?"

Kurenai paused for a long moment before answering. "When you use a jutsu, don't you feel a slight draining sensation as your chakra goes to fuel the technique?"

Naruto shook his head, his eyes widening.

"What does it feel like?" Kurenai asked carefully.

"More like relief," Naruto answered faintly, staring off into the distance. Then he blinked and nodded. "It's like when you have to go to the bathroom really bad, and you couldn't for a while, and then when you do, it's really…" Naruto's voice trailed off as he shook his head.

Hinata was blushing again, and Shino's shoulders appeared to be quivering. Even the corners of Kurenai-sensei's mouth were turning

up. It wasn't fair! "You did ask me what it felt like," Naruto finally said in exasperation.

"You are correct, Naruto," his jonin said with a nod. "While your choice of metaphor is unfortunate, it is also descriptive. You appear to have larger than normal chakra reserves, which would also explain your ability to use Kage Bunshin no Jutsu. While a large reserve is desirable in a shinobi, most do not develop so large a capacity until after they have mastered basic chakra control techniques. You need to practice limiting how much chakra you allow to… *flow* … into your jutsus, starting with this one. Water any plants along the roadside that appear to be dried out, and see if you can reduce your effect size until it is comparable to Shino and Hinata's."

Naruto nodded, grateful that something useful might come out of this debacle, besides managing to embarrass himself.

"In the future," Kurenai continued, "when we learn new jutsus, I'll try to give you an expectation of how much chakra to use, in relation to this one." She smiled. "We wouldn't want you to destroy your clothes with a cleansing jutsu, would we?"

Naruto laughed at that mental image, and wondered why Hinata squeaked and looked away.

Following his sensei's directions, Naruto spent most of the afternoon eroding various spots along the trail. Hinata watched him closely each time he paused to practice over some particularly parched-looking bush. Oddly enough, though, it didn't make him self-conscious. He supposed he was used to her watching him when they practiced chakra-control exercises.

Since the water-walking exercise, he hadn't had too many problems with the red chakra. According to Hinata, she could still occasionally see bits of it circulating through his coils where they ran close to the surface of his skin, but they didn't seem to be interfering as much anymore. Given what he knew about the probable source of the oddly-colored chakra, Naruto wasn't sure what to make of that. If the

stupid fox was aware of what was going on, it might have figured out that ruining Naruto's training just made it more likely they would *both* die on a mission. But this was a demon, after all, so he wasn't sure he could ascribe normal logic to its actions.

Eventually, Naruto figured out how it should feel when he put just enough chakra into the jutsu. The first time he achieved this, Hinata gave him a broad smile, the first genuine one he'd seen from her since they left Konoha, and he promptly lost control of the jutsu and blasted the poor bush out by its roots. Hinata's face grew so chagrined that Naruto couldn't help but laugh out loud. Hinata looked down again, but eventually recovered and flashed a small grin of her own.

"You know," Naruto said, as they hustled along the road to get ahead of Kurenai and Shino again, "it's nice to be out of Konoha, at least for a little while."

"Hai," Hinata agreed, nodding slowly.

"It's one of the nice things about being a shinobi, I guess," he continued. "You get to travel a lot, going on missions."

"Naruto?" Hinata asked quietly.

Naruto turned toward the girl.

Her face had gone very still, and she regarded him with widened eyes. Her mouth opened and closed once, with no sound coming out. Then she swallowed and was able to speak. "D-do you ever think about leaving Konoha?" she asked quietly.

As Hinata asked the question he'd asked himself the day before, Naruto felt like he'd been punched in the stomach. He'd hoped she hadn't noticed the villagers' hateful eyes, and the way they acted. Their attitude was a little more subdued around his teammates than when he was alone, and he tried to avoid the meaner adults as much as possible when he was with them. He thought he'd pulled it off

since neither Shino nor Hinata had asked him about it. But Hinata's question, combined with the look on her face, told him that she knew all too well what was going on. For a moment, Naruto felt exposed, like he'd been caught coming out of the bath.

The blond shinobi didn't need to ask if his face gave away some of his emotions, because Hinata abruptly turned her head. He understood she was trying to avoid embarrassing him, but the reminder that he'd lost control of his facial expression was unwelcome. "G-gomen," she said, studying a pine tree that appeared to have been struck by lightning at some point, "that is none of my business."

"You're allowed to ask," Naruto said quickly. "I don't know, really. Probably not," he reassured her. "Konoha is my home. I can't become Hokage if I leave, can I? Besides, someone has to keep you three entertained with 'unfortunate metaphors'," he added, grinning as she turned back.

"Hai!" she said in a small voice, and seemed to relax a little. Naruto realized she was probably worried about having to break in a new teammate if he ran away from Konoha, which was understandable. Just their luck, they'd be stuck with an idiot like Sasuke who'd be too busy looking cool to actually watch their backs.

By the time the sun was setting, Naruto felt like he had a pretty good feel for both the water gathering jutsu and how to limit his chakra output. Kurenai led them away from the road for several minutes, until they found a small clearing in which they could pitch their tents. Hinata volunteered to gather stones for a small fire while the others ventured into the woods as Kurenai discussed how they would divide up the necessary tasks. With the assistance of Shino's bugs, the three of them found some rabbits for their evening meal. Kurenai showed them the proper way to clean the animals. By the time they'd brought the dressed meat back to their camp, Hinata had a bright but smokeless fire going inside the sunken fire-pit she'd dug with the folding shovel from Kurenai's pack. It was deep enough that the flames would be invisible from more than a few yards away.

Naruto was hopeful when he noticed that Hinata also had several handfuls of greenery that she'd collected. He hoped those were spices, because just eating burnt rabbit didn't appeal to him that much… but with the way Hinata prepared things, he might be looking forward to dinner after all.

While Hinata tended the herb-stuffed rabbit sizzling on spits over the sunken fire, Naruto and Shino set up the tent they'd be sharing and Kurenai set up a tent for her and Hinata. By the time they were done, it was fully dark, and the appetizing smells were making Naruto's stomach rumble loudly.

When they sat down to eat, Naruto was dismayed to see that there was a field ration bar set out for each of them. Kurenai seemed to note his expression, because she was looking directly at him when she spoke. "Eat the rations first, then the rabbit. I'm sure Hinata has done an excellent job, if the smell is any indication, but each bar is designed to contain all the nutrients you should need for a day of high activity," she said. "I don't want to see any pieces of them left over. We're going to be a long way from the nearest hospital, so we can't afford for anyone to get sick."

"Hai," Naruto said in a resigned tone. He picked up the bar, unwrapped it, and crammed it into his mouth with little ceremony. He chewed slowly and, with frequent sips from his canteen, eventually swallowed the pasty mess. Then he let out a sigh and picked up the skewer Hinata had stuck in the ground before him. It smelled even better at close range, especially after the offensively bland ration bar. He paused, noting that everyone else was reaching for their skewers, and nodded toward Hinata and said "Itadakimasu!" with a broad smile.

The rabbit skewer lived up to his expectations, and he had to resist the urge to gobble it down. Instead, he ate it slowly, savoring the tasty meat. He glanced up at Hinata, who hadn't touched hers yet, and was instead looking nervously at her teammates. Naruto was amazed when he realized she was worried they wouldn't like it. "Hinata!" he said suddenly, making her jump.

"Hai!" she squeaked, and Naruto nearly laughed out loud at the expression on her face.

"What did you use on this rabbit?" he asked.

"Just some herbs I found," she answered hesitantly. "Did it turn out bad?" she asked, her face falling.

"No! No! No! It's really good!" Naruto quickly assured her. "I wasn't really looking forward to dinner until I smelled it cooking!"

"Naruto is correct, Hinata," Shino added, making Naruto jump a little when the normally silent boy spoke. "It is surprisingly flavorful."

Hinata just blinked, and a slow flush crept up her cheeks.

"They are correct, Hinata," their sensei added. But then she frowned. "But that does not mean you should always be stuck with the cooking. We should rotate tasks while we are on a mission."

Naruto frowned at his teacher for a moment. Then his eyes widened and he turned toward Hinata. "I'll do the wood gathering and water collection when it's your turn if you'll cook when it's my turn," he offered.

Shino turned toward Naruto and nodded after a moment's silence. "I will take your turns setting up the tents and hunting," he offered.

Hinata's blush grew darker, but Kurenai's voice cut in. "I expected better from both of you," she said in a frosty tone.

"Ano, Sensei," Hinata said quickly. "It's all right. I like to cook."

Kurenai didn't say anything else, but she gave both Naruto and Shino several dark looks as they consumed the skewers in silence. As they finished, Naruto gathered up the plates and utensils, and then bowed formally to the seething jonin. "Sensei, with your permission, I will demonstrate that I have mastered casting the water gathering jutsu at an appropriate strength level."

Kurenai eyed him for a moment, but then nodded.

Naruto carried the plates off into the woods. As they stepped away from the camp, he said "I don't want to get any of our equipment wet if it misfires or runs down the hill."

However, he led his teacher a lot further from the camp than was seemingly necessary. Finally, he stopped and set the plates down on top of an old log and turned back toward Kurenai. "Before we do anything else," he began, "I'd like to explain why I asked Hinata to trade tasks with me."

"There's a reason besides feeling like she should cook for you?" Kurenai asked coolly, "Or is there something else?"

"I cook for myself almost every day," Naruto said, scowling a little. "But Hinata's really good at it, and I think it'll make her feel better."

Kurenai looked a little puzzled. "Explain," she said. It didn't really sound like a request, either.

"I'm not really sure why," he admitted, "but it just seems to. Maybe because she's so good at it, and she likes to do something she knows she's good at? When we started training together in the evenings, she began bringing these really huge bentos and insisted on sharing her dinner with me. I figured out after a while that she always brought more than enough food for both of us. I never asked her to do it, but she seemed happy when I thanked her." He scratched his head. "I'm not sure what happened with her training the night before we left Konoha, but I'm hoping letting her do the cooking will make her feel better. We just need to make sure she knows we like what she makes."

Kurenai just looked at him for a long moment. "I owe you and Shino an apology, it seems."

Naruto just shrugged. "But it is true that she'll do a better job than I will," he said, with a small grin.

Kurenai smiled as well at his small confession. "That was fairly perceptive of you, Naruto," she said approvingly.

The boy just shrugged, though his cheeks reddened a little. "Maybe, but I'm not perceptive enough to figure out what's going on. There's something… wrong, isn't there?" he asked.

Kurenai took a deep breath. "Perhaps," she allowed, "but I am not permitted to say."

Naruto frowned. "I don't know what to do," he finally said.

Kurenai thought about his obvious concern for his teammate, and wondered if Hinata had noticed it yet. "I think it will come to you," she finally said. "Now, you were going to demonstrate your mastery of a certain jutsu?"

Naruto shook his head suddenly. "Hai," he said as he turned toward the plates and spread them out on the stump. "Suiton: Condensation!" he barked as he finished the seals.

A stream of water an inch and a half wide shot out of the chakra vortex that appeared in front of Naruto's palm. Though the stream did flow a bit quickly, it nonetheless rinsed off the plates and utensils without scattering them into the undergrowth.

"Much better," Kurenai said approvingly. "Was it difficult to keep it under control?" she asked.

"A little," Naruto admitted. "Is it because of… you know?"

Kurenai sighed and nodded. "I think so. But try to look at this positively. In the long run, I think it will be easier for you to learn to release chakra in smaller quantities than it would be for one of your classmates to build up a chakra capacity like yours."

Naruto frowned. "I suppose so," he said slowly. "Now I need to figure out the appropriate amounts of chakra to release for every jutsu I

know."

"I can help you there," Kurenai assured him. "And if you are not overloading them every time you use them, you might find that they will misfire less often."

Naruto looked thoughtful as he gathered up the plates. "That's why I couldn't make a decent Bunshin for my genin exam, wasn't it?"

"But you can produce a horde of Kage Bunshin with greater reliability because it requires much more chakra… and therefore you aren't overloading the Jutsu as badly. That would make sense," she concluded in a thoughtful voice.

"Some times I want to just jam a kunai through that stupid seal," Naruto growled, "and see how that damn thing likes being messed with."

"I do not think that would be a good idea," Kurenai-sensei said in a very quiet voice. Naruto looked up and realized her face had become pale.

"I don't mean I want to cut my belly," Naruto said quickly. "I'm just tired of this thing messing up my life."

"Then the best revenge is living well, isn't it?" Kurenai asked.

Naruto looked thoughtful again as he shook the water off the plates and stacked them up. "I suppose it would be," he agreed.

By the time they returned to the campsite, Shino and Hinata had retired to their respective tents. With the watch rotation, Kurenai was to take the first shift, so Naruto went to his tent.

Shino was already in his sleeping bag, with only the top of his head visible. "Why exactly do you want Hinata to do all the cooking? I assume there is a reason aside from her considerable skill," the boy said, his voice slightly muffled.

"I think it might make her feel better," Naruto said as he removed his jacket and unzipped his patched bedroll. He didn't bother to remove the weights. "Just make sure you let her know how good it is."

"It was unusually well-prepared, especially given the conditions," Shino agreed. "So this is intended to build up her confidence?"

Naruto was silent for a moment as he stretched out and tried to get comfortable. "I suppose so. Something's bugging her though. That family training thing seems sort of messed up."

"The Hyuugas are a highly respected clan," Shino reminded him.

"Like the Uchiha's were?" Naruto asked, thinking about their last encounter with Sasuke.

"Point taken," Shino agreed.

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The night passed uneventfully, and in the morning they ate the rest of the rabbit. Oddly enough, it was even better cold, and Naruto noticed Hinata blushing a little each time he made a happy sound as they ate. He watched out of the corner of his eye, hamming it up a little, and wondered why he found it so fun to tease the quiet kunoichi.

After they broke camp and resumed their journey, Naruto asked his sensei for another jutsu to practice as they walked. After a moment's thought, she agreed. But only if he could perform the water-gathering Jutsu ten times without a slip.

The first time, he failed on the ninth attempt, but after that he was able to produce ten without a hitch. Kurenai-sensei agreed that he had, indeed mastered the jutsu along with his teammates, and they took a short break from walking while she demonstrated a new technique.

"Now this is a combat jutsu," she said in a serious voice after showing them the seals. "Be very careful how you use it. This was supposedly developed in Cloud Country, by shinobi who were very impressed by the Jyuuken techniques. Rather than forcing chakra out of your hands when attacking, this allows you to convert a small amount of chakra into electrical energy, and keep it confined to your hands. If you strike an opponent while this is active, the electrical energy will arc into your target, causing some additional damage."

After asking her students some general questions, Kurenai sighed and launched into a lengthy explanation of electricity and how it behaved. Naruto found it a little confusing, but tried to take it all in. After all, he might have to fight someone using electrical attacks someday.

"So metal armor won't stop it very well, unless it's insulated," Naruto repeated back, "and don't use it in water unless I want to shock myself."

Kurenai nodded. "I can't believe they didn't cover basic physics at the academy."

"Ano," Hinata asked, "is it that important for shinobi?"

"There is no such thing as useless knowledge," Kurenai said in a very serious voice. Then she smiled. "While we walk, I will tell you how a lack of such knowledge caused a jonin to be defeated by a very junior chuunin."

Naruto understood, as his sensei told her story, that she was trying to teach them all something – and probably him in particular. What he didn't understand was why his previous teachers couldn't make their lessons as interesting as she did. He tripped and stumbled twice over ruts in the road, barely catching himself before he hit the ground, as Kurenai described the desperate struggle.

When Kurenai's tale reached its conclusion and the wounded female chuunin grabbed her opponent's weighted metallic chain and

shocked him unconscious, Naruto couldn't help but leap into the air and cheer in a loud voice.

"I'm gratified that you found the story entertaining, but does anyone remember what we were discussing?" Kurenai asked acerbically.

"Your opponent was ignorant of the conductive properties of steel," Shino replied, "and did not understand that every time he attacked you with a metallic weapon, he was inviting an electrical counterstrike."

"I did not say the kunoichi involved was myself," Kurenai corrected modestly.

"You were not? I would find it hard to believe someone not involved in the fight could recall the pertinent details," Shino replied in a reasonable tone.

Kurenai inclined her head in acknowledgment, but did not speak further.

Naruto practiced the seals as they walked. According to Kurenai, the jutsu required a minimum chakra five times larger than the water gathering one. However, since the seals required both his hands to perform, Naruto had to discharge the electricity before he could try again. He accomplished this by stepping off the side of the path and slamming his palm into the trunk of the nearest tree.

The first time he did this, Naruto was disappointed by how little the tree reacted. The bark was totally unmarked, and he began wondering if he'd put the correct amount of chakra into the technique. So the next time he tried it, he increased the chakra, but it still left the bark unmarked.

Naruto frowned and pumped a little more chakra into the next attempt. There was a faint crackle when he slapped the next tree, but no other effect. Naruto scowled in frustration. "Raiton: Shocking Grasp!" he growled and really pushed some chakra into it this time.

Now, the palm of his hand glowed with a bright golden light and a crackling that would drown out angry Kikai bugs filled the air. Naruto let out a whoop and slammed his palm into a tree trunk, even as Kurenai shouted behind him.

There was a bright flash, followed by a thunderous crack, and Naruto found himself picked up and flung bodily through the air. He slammed into the ground, knocking the breath out of his lungs as he slid through the undergrowth, wondering why his face hurt.

A few minutes later, Naruto was sitting cross-legged on the ground, being lectured.

"I can't believe you could be so irresponsible!" Kurenai fumed. "You could have killed yourself!"

"Ano," Naruto said, wincing as Hinata pulled another splinter out of his cheek. The flash made him screw his eyes shut which probably saved his eyes. His heavy jacket, gloves, and forehead protector also blocked the majority of the wooden shrapnel. He was glad of that, because the few bits that lodged in his flesh hurt badly enough. "Sensei, why did the tree explode like that? Every time I hit one before that, I didn't even leave a mark."

Kurenai stared at him for a moment. "Naruto, trees are grounded. Small electrical charges shouldn't damage them at all."

"Then why did that last one explode?" he asked.

"Because you put far too much chakra into that technique!" she snapped. "So much electrical current passed through the wood that it super-heated the sap inside, converting it into steam, and made it explode! That's what happens when lightning strikes a tree!"

"Really?" Naruto said, smiling despite the blood smeared on his cheeks. Hinata put away her tweezers and silently handed him a damp cloth. "That's great!"

Kurenai spun on her heel and quickly walked away.

"It would be great," Shino observed, "provided you manage to avoid blowing yourself up in the future."

"Well, yeah," Naruto said as he wiped off his face.

Hinata pulled out a small jar of medicinal cream, but the tiny punctures appeared to have closed on their own. She frowned slightly as she put the jar back into her bag.

Naruto stood up and dusted himself off. "Arigatou, Hinata-chan!"

Hinata ducked her head and blushed at the familiar form of address.

"Perhaps you should refrain from practicing any more jutsus until we reach the border," Shino said as they donned their backpacks.

"What are you, sensei now?" Naruto grumbled. *He* thought the Raiton Jutsu had totally kicked butt. It wasn't his fault he didn't know trees would explode.

"No," Shino replied, "but our orders are to relieve Dariketsu's team before nightfall today, and we're going to be late if there are any more delays."

Naruto looked up at the late afternoon sun and cringed. "Oi! Let's get moving!" he shouted and set off down the trail again.

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The sky was beginning to darken in the East when Kurenai called a halt.

"What is it Sensei?" Naruto asked. He hoped she wasn't going to announce that they had failed. They had to be close to the border by now!

"Something…" Kurenai said, looking around. "Hinata?" she called out.

Naruto spun toward his teammate who'd been on point. She was no longer there. "Hinata!" he yelled.

Kurenai cocked her head to the side. "It's subtle, but… Naruto! Chakra Pulse!" she barked.

Naruto realized that his sensei must have sensed a Genjutsu and immediately began pushing his chakra inwards compressing it into a small, hard ball. Whoever had done this must have cast it between Hinata's Byakugan scans. While removing Hinata before she could detect the Genjutsu made tactical sense, it still infuriated Naruto. "Naruto Higi: Chakra Pulse!" he snarled when he felt like he was about to explode. He released the pulse.

The trees around them wavered as the chakra shockwave passed through them. Three of the trees were replaced by figures in dark cloaks. An arm protruded from one of the cloaks, holding up Hinata, who sagged limply like she was asleep.

Naruto was about to charge forward when Hinata's eyes shot open and her body twisted. Her hands flashed toward her captor's arm and suddenly she was spinning through the air like a doll thrown by a careless child. Hinata twisted in midair, stabilizing her tumble, and managed to land in a crouch next to Shino.

Naruto stepped forward, his hands falling into a familiar seal. "Kage Bunishin no-" he began, but stopped when he felt Kurenai's hand grip his shoulder. How had she gotten behind him so quickly?

"Aren't you a little old for playing games, Dariketsu?" his sensei asked in a *very* disapproving voice.

The middle figure snorted and threw back his hood. Dark hair was drawn back into a short pony-tail and even darker eyes glared contemptuously. "They have you on babysitting duty, Yuuhi?" he drawled, smirking.

Naruto ground his teeth together, but felt Kurenai's hand tighten even further on his shoulder and subsided. Her fingernails felt *sharp* .

"Hardly," Kurenai replied in a frosty tone. "You've been recalled to Konoha," she said as she pulled the red-sealed scroll out of her vest and tossed it to the shinobi.

The man's eyes widened. "Is this some kind of joke?" he asked as he cracked open the seal with a small flash of chakra.

"No," Kurenai replied. "The Hokage is tired of your bumbling. You're supposed to be securing the border, not provoking the Iwa ninjas for your own amusement."

"And you and these brats are going to do a better job? Have you lost your mind?" Dariketsu demanded, his face growing redder by the second.

"We are more than sufficient to achieve our objectives," Kurenai said coolly.

The man snorted. "The smallest Hyuuga I've ever seen, one of those bug users, and… is that, *him* ?" he asked.

Naruto felt his stomach drop and he watched his teammates from the corner of his eye. He wanted to jump this idiot and pound him before he said any more, but Kurenai-sensei's hand was like an iron band around his shoulder.

"Yes, this is the infamous prankster Uzumaki Naruto, though his pranking days seem to be over," Kurenai replied. "He understands that shinobi are bound by the Hokage's laws, no matter where they are."

Dariketsu's eyes narrowed as they flickered from Naruto to his teammates. He turned his head and spat. "Fine, we will report to the Hokage. Try not to get murdered in your sleep by some bloodthirsty

animal," he said in a sardonic tone. "Brand, Chusei, let's strike camp and leave these 'shinobi' to their mission. The sooner we leave, the sooner we get some warm sake in us."

A wind sprang out of nowhere, causing their cloaks to flap in the mysterious breeze. Then they were gone, with only a swirling torrent of wind-blown leaves to mark their place.

"Baka," Naruto growled.

A/N:

Many thanks to my betas, Runsamok and bibliophile20.

"Naruto Higi:"- Naruto's Secret Technique (Yes, it's a slightly grandiose title for a relatively simple technique, but remember who we're talking about here.)

"Iwa" – Stone or Rock

Yes, this version of Naruto is already a bit more thoughtful than in canon (though there is some serious backsliding at times). Keep in mind how much time has been covered in previous chapters… he'd been training under Kurenai-sensei for approaching two months now. He's also spent almost as much time with Gai.

Please address any questions or concerns to my yahoo group, Viridian Dreams. The link is in my Author Profile.

-Matthew

# First Blood

Chapter Seven

Because they were to patrol a couple of miles within the border, Team 8 was required to set up their own camp well back from the boundary with the Land of Earth. Kurenai merely shook her head when their first patrol discovered the subtle traces of Dariketsu's camp. They had claimed a small clearing within sight of the actual border. Naruto supposed the Hokage had been right… those bakas *were* spoiling for a fight if they did that.

Naruto tried to pay close attention to how Kurenai-sensei had them do things, because there was almost always a reason behind it… like the way they randomly varied their patrol patterns to make it harder for someone to slip by them undetected. It was embarrassing, but sometimes he did have to ask her why. At least she didn't berate him for being stupid when she answered his questions.

Instead, she seemed pleased that he wanted to know. Not knowing why she did this began to bother him until he finally had to ask her about that as well. Some instinct made him wait until Hinata and Shino were sparring after dinner, because he wasn't sure what the answer would be.

Kurenai kept her eyes on her students as they fought. Running the patrols was helping their speed and endurance, but she said she still wanted them to train a little when they took breaks. If their bodies were too tired, she would go into what Naruto recognized as her "lecture mode" and talk to them about things they needed to know. Those were usually interesting, but it was another time when she also welcomed questions. Why was this so?

"Ano, Sensei," Naruto said in a low voice as Hinata slapped aside Shino's punch and made a strike toward his midsection that forced him to quickly backpedal. She still wore the weights, but they were

slowing her down less and less. He wondered if she even noticed this.

"What is it, Naruto?" Kurenai replied.

"Er, I've been asking a lot of questions lately," he said, but his voice trailed off. How could he say this without sounding like a baka?

"Yes," she said, her eyes still on the combatants, "I'm glad you've been taking a more active role in learning strategy and tactics."

"But that's just it," Naruto said, the words tumbling out easier now. "Why are you so happy that I'm asking all these questions? Almost all the teachers at the Academy got mad when I ask questions!"

"Everyone but Iruka?" she asked softly, Shino used his greater reach to force Hinata to retreat again.

Naruto shrugged. "Iruka's different. He grew up without parents like I did, so he cuts me a break."

"No," Kurenai said firmly, "he's not. He's doing his job properly. Evidently, he's one of the few instructors that is."

"Nani?" Naruto asked, his eyebrows drawn together in confusion.

Kurenai sighed. "Naruto, why do you ask those questions? Are you seeking attention? Are you trying to delay me so I don't start talking about a new subject? Or are you simply trying to irritate me?"

"No Sensei!" Naruto said quickly, "I just asked because I wanted to know!"

"Exactly," Kurenai murmured as Hinata leapt over Shino's leg sweep. "A student that actually *wants* to learn is a blessing to a teacher. Why should I want to discourage that?"

"But… why didn't the instructors want…" Naruto's voice trailed off. "It's because of me, isn't it?" he asked coldly.

"Not precisely," Kurenai said in a voice little more than a whisper. "Naruto, I'm not going to excuse their behavior, but I think it might help you to understand. When the Kyuubi attacked, it was like a natural disaster. It was unstoppable. I was miles away from the battle and I could still feel… it. More chakra and killing intent than I'd ever imagined was possible to exist. I'd never been more afraid in my life, and I imagine that was true for everyone else in Konoha. Then it was defeated, but at the cost of the Yondaime's life. It's hard explain how much we all loved the Fourth Hokage, but I think any one of us would have given their lives in his place, were it possible. But then he was gone, and so was the demon responsible for his death. Everyone was angry and grieving for the Hokage and everyone else who'd died… and there was no real outlet for that grief and rage. I know the Third and Fourth Hokages wanted you to be seen as the savior of the village, but I don't think it was possible, not with everyone still full of rage. Especially since there was really only one obvious outlet for that rage…"

"Me," Naruto finished her sentence dully. After another quick exchange of blows, Hinata and Shino sprang apart, panting.

"It's hard to break an ingrained habit," Kurenai said, slipping into her lecture-mode for a moment, "but once someone does manage to see the real Naruto, they don't go back to seeing you as a demon, do they?"

"No, they don't," Naruto said with a sigh. "But I was at the Academy for *years* , and it seems like Iruka is the only one that bothered. All of the other instructors were just trying to get back at my prisoner by making me feel stupid."

"As I said, I will not excuse their behavior," Kurenai agreed, "but I also know that Iruka really does care about you. When he heard about the spy, he thought I'd ordered you to fight… until I explained, he looked like he wanted to kill me."

Naruto was mortified that Iruka almost attacked another shinobi because of him, especially a jonin. Oddly enough, he also felt a

strange warmth to know that the man cared about him that much. "G-gomen," he choked out, apologizing.

"No need for apologies," Kurenai said. "I'm glad to see the truth of his feelings. We had a very productive conversation, and I think I may be able to call him a friend in the future. But do you realize why my attitude toward questions may be somewhat at odds with what you have previously experienced?"

Naruto looked puzzled for a moment and then nodded. "Because the others wanted me to stay ignorant and fail as a ninja… that was the only means they could see for getting even with the Kyuubi."

"That is an accurate summation," Kurenai said as Hinata landed a solid hit on Shino's shoulder, making him stumble backwards. "Understanding and teasing apart the motivations of others, based upon indirect observations, is a valuable skill to cultivate for a shinobi. Even more so for a Hokage."

"Everything is a lesson with you, isn't it?" Naruto asked, half-jokingly.

"Of course," Kurenai replied softly as she stood up. "We have a lot of ground to make up, and I am responsible for your education now."

Naruto blinked as he absorbed that statement. He barely listened as Kurenai gave a detailed critique of the sparring match they'd just watched together.

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Things were quiet, at least at first. When Kurenai was satisfied that their stamina and chakra reserves were up to the task, they began following their patrol routes through the tree cover rather than on the ground. After mastering the water-walking exercises, using chakra to keep their footing on tree branches was easy.

Before the day was over, they were leaping from tree to tree, subtly boosting their leg strength with small amounts of chakra to improve their leaping distance. Even with his weights, Naruto could make a

twenty meter jump from a standing start, without really straining himself. He did, however, make sure he aimed for branches that were sturdy enough to handle his extra weight. Getting dumped on his head once was enough.

While this method was faster, Kurenai cautioned them to not use it in hostile territory, or when they feared they would be ambushed. It was damned hard to dodge a thrown kunai when you were in mid-leap, and landing on an explosive tag can ruin your whole day.

With a little subtle begging, Naruto also persuaded Kurenai to show them some more jutsus. It had been embarrassing to admit it at first, but she also showed him why he had so many problems using the body substitution technique, Kawarimi no Jutsu. It worked some times, like when he ambushed Sasuke-teme, but it failed more often than not.

As he suspected, he'd been throwing *far* too much chakra into the technique, which surprised him at first. He thought moving your body in the blink of an eye, and replacing it with a nearby object would take a lot of energy. Kurenai-sensei merely shook her head and explained that if the common shinobi technique required as much chakra as he used, it would kill anyone weaker than a jonin who tried it.

It was a little disturbing to realize just how much more chakra he had available than other… well, *normal* ninjas. Of course, as Kurenai pointed out, as bad as his chakra control was, he wasted so much that it wasn't that obvious. But in the same breath she promised to work with him until he was as efficient as she was. Naruto couldn't wait… he wanted to show everyone that he wasn't just empty boasts.

Kurenai's repertoire of ninjutsu seemed somewhat eclectic. She seemed to know techniques from a variety of styles. Sensei reiterated her motto of "there is no such thing as useless knowledge" when Shino asked her about it as she introduced them to a Doton jutsu. "Doton: Wana" let one mold chakra to influence the ground

around their target. It required you to touch the ground as you released the molded chakra. But making the earth flow up around the target's feet, slowing them down or trapping them, was really useful if used correctly.

This jutsu was especially tricky for Naruto, because if he molded too much chakra into the technique, the ground would liquefy around Kurenai's feet, letting her merely step out of it. Fortunately, all the practice he'd had getting Suiton: Gyoushuu under control paid off here, and he mastered it almost as soon as Shino and Hinata.

He was a little puzzled when he finally got it right. Hinata was trying to apologize for something, but when he asked her what she did wrong, she wouldn't tell him. Remembering Kurenai's words, he just shrugged and smiled at her. "Whatever you did, I'm not mad at you. You're a good person, Hinata, so I know you'd never do something to be mean."

For some reason, she spun around and quickly walked away. Naruto turned to Shino with a questioning expression, but the bug user wouldn't say anything. Again, Naruto had the oddest feeling that Shino was smirking at him. He hoped Kurenai introduced a Katon jutsu next, so he could 'accidentally' burn the collar off of Shino's jacket.

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On the second week of the patrol, Hinata's Byakugan caught traces of swift movement at the edges of her range. They changed courses to track what had to be a shinobi and followed it all the way back to the border. As quick as they were, it still crossed back over the border before they could catch it, and Kurenai called a halt when they were still several meters short of the invisible boundary. Naruto noticed they were standing near the clearing that Dariketsu's team had used as a campsite.

At the other end of the clearing, on the Earth side of the border, were four figures that seemed to be around Kurenai's height. Naruto wondered which one had violated their border to lead them here. He

looked left and right, his nostrils flaring, wary of an ambush. Hinata's Byakugan were active, and some slight motion in the grass around Shino's feet meant his bugs were deploying as well. A few seemed to have taken to the air after moving well away from their host.

"Have we satisfied your curiosity?" Kurenai called out.

"Somewhat," the largest of the four Rock ninjas replied. They were all dressed in tans and neutral grays, and the lower portions of their faces were covered as well. "I'm somewhat insulted that Konoha sends a group of children to match us."

"We are not here to contest with you," Kurenai said firmly. "The Hokage does not want any more incidents along this border. Dariketsu was recalled for that reason."

"That's too bad," the Rock leader yelled back with an evil laugh. "He was fun to bait, if a bit too predictable."

Naruto didn't really want to draw attention to himself… but he'd become rather warm during the extended chase through the trees. He slowly unzipped his heavy jacket so the cool morning air could cool him down.

As slight as that motion was, it still drew the attention of the Rock shinobi. Naruto froze as he felt sudden spikes of killing intent, radiating from across the clearing. His ears strained to catch the whispered words exchanged between the Iwa ninjas, but he could barely make out a few, such as "bastard", "flash", and "yellow". It really didn't make a lot of sense to him, but he froze in place, not wanting to provoke anything more until Kurenai said the word.

"I see your mission is not as innocent as I would have believed," the Rock leader called out as they split up and disappeared into the trees. "You will not catch us unaware when you come for our blood."

"Back into the trees," Kurenai hissed. Naruto waited until Shino and Hinata were halfway there before he began backing out of the

clearing. His senses seemed extraordinarily sharp, and he could almost hear the individual blades of grass flex under his sandals.

As he slipped through the trees, Kurenai caught his eye. Her frown faded as he quickly glanced at Shino and Hinata, verifying their positions. She nodded and motioned for them to follow her. As previously arranged, Hinata sped up until she was even with Kurenai. Her Byakugan was active and checked their path for ambushes or traps. Shino trailed behind them, and Naruto was a little farther back. If any of his team were attacked, he was in a position to see it immediately and counterattack. If he was targeted, Hinata's all-around vision would let them know as well.

Kurenai-sensei led them on a circuitous route, doubling back many times to check for pursuers. Nothing more dangerous than a frightened deer was found, so eventually they returned to their camp.

"A-ano, Sensei," Hinata said as soon as they stopped. "What happened back there?"

"I'm not completely sure," Kurenai said, frowning.

"Their sudden aggressiveness is worrying," Shino said gravely. Naruto could only nod in agreement.

"I could read their lips, a little, through their masks," Hinata said, blushing. "What does 'Yellow Flash' mean?"

Kurenai stiffened at Hinata's words, and then she turned and peered closely at Naruto. "I suppose… if they saw him at a distance… and no real clues for gauging his height…" she murmured. She let out a sigh as all three of her genins frowned at her in confusion.

"All right, I think I know what that was," the jonin said. "You've all seen the carving of the Fourth Hokage on the cliff overlooking Konoha, right?"

They nodded.

"Well, from a distance, Naruto bears a passing resemblance to the Yondaime," she continued.

"Did he have yellow hair like I do?" Naruto interrupted.

"Yes," Kurenai replied. "And because of that, and a special jutsu of his, he was often known as 'The Yellow Flash of Konoha'."

"But why would Naruto's resemblance to the Fourth Hokage cause such a reaction?" Shino asked before Naruto could.

Kurenai took a deep breath and sat down on a log they'd moved near the fire pit. "Well, as you know, there was a war between Konoha and the Hidden Village of Stone back before you were born." She paused for a moment while they all nodded. "Before becoming the Hokage, the Yondaime was a jonin who fought in many battles. He was known for his clever plans and skillful leadership. It is suspected that the Rock leaders knew of this and wanted to draw him out. Shinobi historians don't know for sure that the Iwa ninjas specifically targeted his students, but we do know that one was killed, an Uchiha named Obito."

Kurenai paused, taking a deep breath. "Whatever they hoped to accomplish by killing the Fourth's student, it did not succeed. After his remaining students returned to Konoha to recover, he returned to the battlefields and… well, by the end of the war, over half of the Shinobi of Iwagakure had fallen to 'The Yellow Flash' and the attacks he led."

Naruto felt his mouth drop open in shock. That wasn't something they'd lectured about at the Academy. "H-he *killed* half of the whole village?" he asked in shock.

"The shinobi, yes. We were at war," Kurenai said gravely, "and that's what happens in a war. Some people think the Sandaime is weak because he favors peace… I call them fools."

Naruto shook his head. "They can't really believe I'm the Fourth Hokage, can they? I mean, that's crazy!"

Kurenai shook her head. "No, though scared people often believe irrational things. But they may think you were sent specifically to intimidate or provoke them. I don't think the Hokage anticipated this reaction when he assigned us this mission. Hopefully, they will be encouraged to stay on their own side of the border for now."

"If they do not, I will know," Shino added. "They stood there long enough for at least one of my allies to climb onto each of them. Those were female kikai bugs, so I will quickly know if they get within scent range of one of my sentries."

"Very good, Shino," Kurenai said with a smile. "While they initiated this encounter by crossing over into Fire Country territory, we have gained far more than they in the exchange."

Naruto remembered Kurenai's words and tried to stay optimistic as he gathered wood for the cook fire. The thought of the heroic Yondaime killing people made him feel ill, but Kurenai was right… it was a war, and he supposed he didn't have much choice. And neither would he, if war broke out again. He wondered who those fools were that Kurenai had talked about, and resolved to be a little nicer to the Hokage next time he saw the old man.

The blond-haired genin went about his chores, but he would think back on this conversation many times in the years to come.

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The first hint of trouble came from Hinata, whose head snapped around while they were on a routine patrol.

"Sensei!" she hissed.

Naruto, who was in the process of leaping toward the next tree, caught himself with one foot still touching bark, so he increased the chakra in that foot and awkwardly recoiled back onto the bough.

Hinata was looking to the right of their current course. "They are under a genjutsu," she said as she shook herself and suddenly launched forward. Naruto watched four dark objects drop toward the forest floor from where she'd been standing and knew she'd discarded her weights.

"Hinata!" Kurenai barked, reaching toward the Hyuuga genin.

Naruto wanted to follow, but he knew he needed to see what was going on. "Naruto Majutsu: Chakra Pulse!" he growled as he hurriedly crammed chakra into his hara, and then practically hurled it in the direction Hinata had jumped.

The recoil nearly blew him backward out of the tree, and the bough his feet were chakra-glued to creaked alarmingly. But the ripple sped outwards, knocking a few leaves from the trees like a stiff breeze, and making several figures shimmer into view under a tree in the distance. Three adult-sized shapes swam into view, two of them carrying large bundles.

Naruto had no idea who these men were, or why Hinata was attacking them, but he wasn't going to let her go alone. He jumped after her, Shino and Kurenai barely a step behind.

"Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!" Naruto called out, his hands forming the familiar seal sequence as he dropped toward the men. The three of them were joined by a score of clones.

The man on the left dropped his cloth-wrapped burden and began making seals, his fingers a blur. "Katon: Gurando Fenikkusu Kachuu!" he snapped, and a trio of fireballs sprang from his fingertips. They spiraled outwards, leaving trails of fire that grew ever wider as they spread. Shino and Kurenai avoided the worst of it, but the vortex of flames had been aimed directly at Naruto and his clones. Naruto threw his arms in front of his face at the last moment and tried to shift his chakra to protect his face. The heat that washed over him was intense, and he didn't need to hear the multiple pops to know his clones had been destroyed. When he broke through the

funnel of fire, the cool air beyond was incredibly sweet. He dropped to the ground in a crouch as he spread his arms again. His face felt tight and hot, and the smell of scorched hair was unbelievably foul, but he was basically in one piece.

"Damn, Kouro, you're slipping," the largest of the strangers said, "I thought you were going to cook that little bastard for dinner." He was tall and heavily muscled, and wore only loose pants and heavy boots. His shaved head shone in the sunlight that filtered through the trees, and his cold black eyes gleamed like chips of obsidian.

The man on the right wore a blue and black uniform that contrasted with the fire-user's red and black one. He was fending off Hinata with a staff made of gleaming ice, but was having some difficulty handling the weapon while trying to juggle the large bundle he was also burdened with.

Finally, he growled in exasperation and threw his bundle into the air and swung the staff at Hinata crosswise with both hands. The staff was little more than a blur, but the Hyuuga was even faster as she leapt upward, grabbing onto the bundle with both hands and swinging it onto her back as their combined momentum spun her into a tree trunk. Naruto gaped as her feet found purchase on the rough bark and she ran up the trunk in a continuous motion. She angled toward a large branch and began running along the underside of it without even slowing down.

"Dammit, we can't let them delay us. Kill them all," the large shinobi barked. An instant later, his hand flashed upward and deflected the kunai Kurenai had thrown at his face.

"With pleasure, taishou!" Kouro snarled, his hands flashing through seals again. "Katon: Kaenhoushaki no jutsu!" he said and a blot of flame shot from his hands toward the still smoldering Naruto.

"Suiton: Gyoushuu!" Naruto snapped as he ran through the seals. It was a little tricky, trying to align the condensation vortex along a

vertical plane instead of a horizontal one, but he didn't have to worry so much about holding back his chakra this time.

A spinning chakra vortex a foot wide opened up and the air around them became parched of moisture as a blast of water erupted like a fire hose, intercepting the flame blast.

Naruto looked away, blinking rapidly, as steam blasted across the battlefield. There was a loud grunt of pain that brought a fierce grin to his lips. He hadn't missed. A flash of motion drew his eyes to the side.

When Hinata reach the end of the bough, she didn't even slow down and instead launched herself toward the ground. She twisted in midair so that she absorbed the impact with her legs, cradling the bundle as she sank into a low crouch. A kunai flashed and the fabric parted to reveal a young girl, bound and gagged, with furious white eyes like Hinata's.

"The other bundle is Konohamaru-kun," Hinata said as she quickly cut her sister's bonds. Kurenai's eyes widened and she turned toward the package Kouro had discarded, but Naruto was even faster. His fists snapped up and he struck himself a sharp blow on each shoulder, and then threw his arms forward. From under the sleeves of his jacket, his forearm weights flew forward and struck the large ninja in the face, staggering him backward. The discarded weights fell to the ground, where they embedded themselves in the soft forest loam.

In a flash Naruto was running past the leader, whose fist made a crater in the ground inches behind him. Naruto silently thanked Gai and Lee as he grabbed the other bundle and slung it toward his sensei. Kurenai caught it without missing a beat, her kunai already moving.

Things were moving rapidly, too rapidly for him too keep track of. The guy with the ice staff was closing in to reclaim his prize, but Hinata

stepped over her sister, leaving her a kunai to finish freeing her legs, and set herself in his path.

The staff flashed forward, but this time she was ready, and shattered it with a Jyuuken strike. A sharp shard left a line of blood along her cheek and Naruto bared his teeth in a feral snarl.

A ball of chakra-enhanced fire struck him in the back, knocking him to his knees as it tried to ignite the tough jacket material. Naruto somersaulted forward, feeling blisters rise on the back of his neck. He raised himself into a handstand, looking behind him. Kouro was starting another set of hand seals, but a volley of kunai from Kurenai made him abort that attack and leap backwards. Naruto saw the thrown knives imbed themselves up to the rings in the earth and silently reminded himself never to get his sensei mad. He flexed his arms and launched himself into the air, marveling at how much easier this was with half of his weights gone. He struck the quick-release catches for the leg weights as he tumbled, and then snapped his legs out straight to launch them at the flame user.

Kouro jumped backward to avoid those as well, hissing in frustration. But his annoyance was brought up short when a mass of kikai bugs swarmed up his legs and Shino's right arm wrapped around his neck, laying a kunai across the front of his throat. The fire-user's eyes widened and he froze in place.

"Good one, Shino!" Naruto crowed, then turned back toward the big guy. The leader was moving to help the ice-nin with Hinata. "Hey teme! I ain't done with you! Doton: Wana!" He slapped the ground and the soil under the large man's feet writhed and flowed up over his boots.

The largest ninja caught himself as he started to stumble. Then he turned toward Naruto and smiled. His skin took on a metallic sheen and his feet began to sink inches deeper into the ground. With a heave, he tore his feet free of the earth-snare and began striding toward the much smaller green-clad shinobi.

"Naruto! No!" a shrill voice yelled. Roughened as it was from the gag and whatever else he'd been through, Naruto could still recognize Konohamaru's voice. "Don't! He, he killed Iruka-sensei!"

Naruto froze in place. He couldn't move, could breathe. He didn't just hear that. He couldn't have. It was impossible. He felt the blood rushing in his ears as his fingers curled into claws. His blood was turning into fire in his veins as his mind shut down.

He saw Hinata hesitate, jumping back from the ice user and turning toward him, her eyes wide. A quick jutsu from the blue-clad ninja launched a volley of ice shards at the Hyuuga. Her Byakugan still active, Hinata avoided or blocked most of them, but the last one struck the side of her head. She dropped to the ground.

Kurenai hands were a blur as she launched a volley of kunais. The ice-nin dodged and blocked, but still ended up with one jammed into his shoulder. Kurenai charged at him a blade in each hand. "Get out of here! Run!" she shouted at the children who were gingerly climbing to their feet. Konohamaru grabbed the Hyuuga girl's hand and they ran into the forest.

"Now!" the leader said as he stomped toward Naruto, beginning to pick up speed.

A sudden roar of flames from behind him made Naruto turn, even as he spun away from a fist that nearly flattened him as it drove into the ground.

"I don't need to use seals to do this one, boy!" Kouro smirked as his body was wreathed in flames. There was a loud crackling sound as Shino's kikai bugs were incinerated. Shino himself was blown backwards off his feet, his right arm a mass of flames. Naruto continued sidestepping, trying to keep both of the bastards in front of him, and lead them away from Shino and Hinata. The fire user didn't seem to be that interested in Shino, because he began flicking small fireballs at Naruto, making him jump to the side as they ignited the parched grass.

Shino rolled over and over in the grass, eventually smothering the flames as he rolled away from the clearing. The right sleeve of his jacket was burned away, and what Naruto could see of his arm was a mass of red that didn't look good at all. Against all reason, Shino tried to struggle to his feet, holding himself up with his good hand. The ever-present sunglasses gone, the Aburame boy locked gazes with Naruto for a moment. Then his hazel eyes rolled back into his head… he slowly toppled forward and was still.

"Come on," the leader said. "Cook this little brat and then we can triple team the jonin and get out of here."

"I'd like to take my time with her and the girl," the flame-wreathed ninja leered, "but it shall be as you command. Stand still, boy, and I'll make this quick."

Naruto froze in place. The thought of these two hurting his sensei and Hinata finished a process that began with Konohamaru's shout, and gathered momentum as he watched Hinata and Shino fall. He felt something snap inside.

"I'LL KILL YOU!" he screamed and charged toward Kouro, whose eyes were suddenly wide. Everything seemed to be covered by a red haze, and Naruto vaguely realized that the Kyuubi's red chakra was exploding out of his skin. He wondered if this meant the seal was breaking, but he didn't really care as long as it meant he could stop them from hurting his friends.

The fire-user hurled fireball after fireball at the short ninja, who suddenly didn't seem so ridiculous an opponent. The pronounced whisker-marks the boy could feel etching deeper into his face probably had something to do with that, along with the pronounced canines that were starting to draw blood from his lower lip. Naruto batted the flaming missiles aside with contempt, ignoring the sting in his palms that disappeared almost as soon as it registered.

As he leapt onto him, Kouro finished a series of frantic seals. "Katon: Okibi Shounetsujigoku!" he screamed as flames exploded outward

from his body.

Naruto crashed through the flaming shockwave, feeling it as little more than a warm breeze through the haze of rage and the red chakra that seemed to feed it. He landed on Kouro and drove the shinobi to his knees as his hands locked around the bastard's throat. The man's hands tore at his wrists, but Naruto's arms could not be moved. The fire storm around them gained in strength as the man's struggles grew more frenzied. Naruto grinned, enjoying the weak man's terror, but a flash of light grey in the corner of his vision seemed to nag at something in his mind. With a wrench, Naruto turned his eyes away from the intoxicating terror in the man's eyes and looked to his left. The firestorm jutsu, heightened by mortal terror, was still expanding. Kurenai and the ice-nin, still locked in mortal combat, were forced to move away, but the flames were also creeping toward Hinata's unconscious body.

Naruto felt like he'd been dunked in ice water. His head snapped back around and he snapped the fire-ninja's neck with one quick motion. He turned toward Hinata, but the metallic ninja was in his way, his face twisted into a rictus of hate.

An enormous fist cocked back and rocketed toward Naruto's face, but he simply raised one hand and caught it. The man grunted and slammed his foot into Naruto's stomach, picking him up and throwing back backward into a half-burned tree trunk.

"I don't know what kind of freak power you have," he snarled, "But I can turn my skin into solid steel! You have as little chance of defeating me as that stupid teacher that tried to protect those brats. I'm going to crush you, and then your leader, and then I'll kill your little friends before I collect my prize… and there is nothing you can do to stop me."

Rather than standing, Naruto raised himself onto all fours, balanced on his fingertips and the balls of his feet. In a flash, he drove forward, sending gouts of churned earth flying into the air behind him. The

metallic ninja laughed and launched himself forward as well, his fist poised to crush the runty brat who dared kill one of his men.

There was a loud crunch as the two collided, and dust and debris filled the air around them. As it settled, one could see where a huge fist had smashed into the ground, flattening everything under it as it made a crater nearly six feet across.

A much smaller fist could be seen protruding from the broad metallic back. Blood poured out of the wound, joining the growing pool beneath the crouching giant.

Smeared with blood and dirt, Naruto levered himself out from between the dead man's arm and his legs. He'd managed to beat the punch, letting it land harmlessly behind him as he slammed his fist through the bastard's chest… but he hadn't changed back from steel with death, and he was heavy as hell.

The blond genin finally squirmed free and looked for his sensei.

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The ice user, whom Kurenai recognized from the Bingo Book as Lisuke the Ice Knife was surprisingly skillful with his created weapons, and they'd exchanged over a dozen blows before Kurenai was fatally distracted by the burst of killer intent radiating from her genin. Was the Kyuubi about to break free after all?

Seizing his chance, the ice user bound her feet in ice. She instantly threw her kunai at him, but he'd anticipated that and ducked them easily. Another Hyoton jutsu bound her arms at her sides, rendering her helpless.

But rather than immediately kill his helpless opponent, the ice-nin watched in shock as the blond brat exploded with a ferocious red chakra and killed both Kouro the Flame and Kazuyo the Anvil. Turning toward the boy's jonin, and now his best ticket to getting out of this alive, he laid the point of his ice-sword alongside her throat

and hoarsely asked her the question burning in his mind: "What the hell was that?"

The answer came from an unexpected direction, a whisper from behind his ear as the helpless jonin in front of him wavered and disappeared. "Kyuubi no Kitsune," was all it said, sounding almost scared. It was the second to last thing he ever heard.

The last was the dull scrape of sharp steel on bone as a kunai was rammed into the base of his skull.

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Naruto breathed a sigh of relief as Kurenai-sensei's genjutsu wavered and faded out… and the last of the kidnappers fell like a puppet with its strings cut. As the red haze disappeared, he suddenly felt horribly tired and sore. After a moment, it was all he could do to stay on his feet.

"Naruto?" Kurenai asked in a quiet voice.

"Hai, sensei," he answered. "Something weird happened. I… I think it started to get out or something." He shuddered violently. If Kyuubi was in danger of breaking out… He jumped when Kurenai put her hand on his shoulder. Why was she willing to stand so close to him?

Kurenai looked him in the eyes as she slowed her breathing and seemed to gather her thoughts. "Naruto," she began, "from what the Hokage told me, your seal was designed to let some of Kyuubi's chakra filter out into your own. Apparently you drew on that when you became afraid."

Naruto nodded, not bothering to correct her. He hadn't been afraid, he'd been *furious* . "If I'm not going to go insane and kill everyone, can we check on Hinata and Shino?"

"I'll take care of that," Kurenai said as she knelt down next to Hinata. "Can you track down Sarutobi Konohamaru and Hyuuga Hanabi?"

Naruto nodded and took a deep breath. "Konohamaru!" he yelled.

"Yeah?" a voice echoed from the trees nearby.

Naruto shrugged at Kurenai who had turned toward him, scowling. "He never does what he's told to do," Naruto explained.

"All right," Kurenai said. "If you know him, reassure him that everything is all right, and keep an eye on Hinata. I think she's just stunned, and I need to see to Shino."

Naruto nodded and slumped down next to his teammate. He was worried about Shino's arm, but Hinata looked so still, lying there like that…

"Naruto?" Konohamaru whispered. Naruto looked up, but he couldn't immediately see the little brat. Maybe he wasn't so bad at the camouflaging art when it was for real.

"It's safe to come out," Naruto said wearily. "We… we got them. We got them all. They won't be hurting anyone ever again." He tried to push Iruka-sensei out of his mind, but it wouldn't cooperate. He'd never get to treat him to ramen like he promised himself he would, dammit.

The bushes to his left stirred and Konohamaru cautiously stepped back into the clearing, still leading the little girl who must be Hinata's sister. The white eyed girl looked at Hinata's unconscious form with a curious lack of interest. "She'll be okay," Naruto reassured her, "she just got hit on the head."

"I'm not surprised she was defeated," the girl said in a clear voice. Her accent was cultured like Hinata's, but the coldness of her words made Naruto scowl.

"She. Was. Not. Defeated," Naruto snarled, angrily biting off each word. "She charged in there and rescued you, achieving her

objective. The ninjas that kidnapped you are dead and we're all alive. *We* won."

Konohamaru glanced uneasily from his rival to his fellow kidnapping victim. "Ah… that's good, Naruto-san. I'm glad Kurenai-sama was able to defeat them."

Naruto sat for a moment, looking down at Hinata. "What happened to Iruka-sensei?" he asked quietly.

Konohamaru looked down. After a moment he sniffed loudly. "I'm sorry, Naruto. They grabbed me at recess, but I saw them at the last moment and called out. Sensei tried to stop them, but… the big one hit him so hard, I heard his bones break. But Sensei kept trying to get up again…"

Naruto closed his eyes, remembering how Iruka fought so hard to save him from Mizuki. "That sounds just like him."

"The b-big one kept hitting him until he stopped moving. I was tied up and couldn't do anything, but they made me watch before they put me in the sack. Sensei w-wasn't breathing," the boy sobbed.

"He should have been stronger if he was going to interfere," the girl snapped. "If he'd been properly trained, he would have stopped them and they wouldn't have gotten away with either of us."

"You shut your mouth!" Konohamaru shouted at the younger girl, making her flinch back like she'd been slapped.

Her face went red and her eyes narrowed. "How dare you! Do you know who I am?" the girl snarled.

"He's the Hokage's grandson, so I believe he outranks you," Naruto snapped, "not even counting the fact that you are an awful brat. I can't believe you are Hinata's sister, or that she'd even bother to try and rescue you." His revulsion and grief at what had happened was

rapidly turning into anger, and this spoiled brat who badmouthed Hinata *and* Iruka-sensei was really asking for it.

He swallowed his anger with great difficulty and looked down at Hinata. Her breathing was slow and even. Concentrating on that seemed to calm him. He failed to protect his teammates, but at least none of them had died. Shino might be badly hurt though.

As his stomach twisted with worry, he heard footsteps approaching. Naruto silently rolled to his feet, bringing his hands up in a taijutsu stance. Konohamaru inhaled sharply, staring at Naruto's right arm. Previously concealed behind the genin's torso, it was coated with drying blood up to the shoulder.

Naruto wearily released his breath and nearly dropped to his knees when Kurenai helped Shino limp into the clearing. There were bandages wrapped around his right forearm, and the sleeve of his red shirt was scorched and seared where it protruded from the right arm hole of his jacket. Naruto blinked. Seeing that unexpectedly bright red shirt at a distance, he'd thought Shino's arm had been burned far worse than it was. He felt a small smile tug at his mouth, the first since they'd left for patrol that morning.

Hinata stirred at last, rolling onto her side and clutching her head. Naruto carefully pulled a cloth from his belt with his left hand, wetted it down with his canteen, and wiped at the clotted blood along Hinata's hairline.

His teammate's eyes shot open and she winced in pain.

"It's all right, Hinata," Naruto said. "We got them. Your sister and Konohamaru are safe."

Hinata seemed to relax slightly at this news.

"My *name* is Hanabi," the younger girl snapped irritably.

"Your *name* will be *face-in-mud* if you don't shut up," Naruto replied with a glare.

"I-it's all right, Naruto," Hinata said quietly. "Hanabi, were you injured?"

"No, no thanks to you. Father will be furious when he finds out you were the first to fall." Naruto thought the girl derived some weird sort of satisfaction from this pronouncement.

Hinata sat up quickly, and Naruto noticed she bit her lower lip and shut her eyes for a moment. He glared at Hanabi, but the girl didn't comment. What the hell was going on with these two?

Hinata slowly climbed to her feet. Naruto thought she was barely keeping her balance, but some impulse kept him from reaching out to steady her. "If you are unhurt, we should probably return to our camp to regroup," she said.

"That might be a good idea," Kurenai said, glancing over at Naruto. "But we should moderate our pace for our guests."

They set out for their camp, walking slowly along the forest floor. After a few minutes, Naruto felt his energy returning and he no longer had to concentrate to avoid stumbling. Of course, putting his weights back on didn't help the situation.

Shino was right in front of him, along with the two young children, both of whom seemed to be a little afraid of the quiet bug-nin. Hinata was in the lead with Kurenai.

"Hinata," Kurenai said, her voice carrying through the still air. "I understand that you were concerned about rescuing your sister, but do you think it might have been better if we devised a plan before attacking the kidnappers?"

"G-gomen, Sensei," Hinata said, ducking her head apologetically. "I would have preferred to have done that," she continued, her voice

clearer than it usually was when she was embarrassed and apologizing. "But there wasn't time. As fast as they were moving, if we didn't immediately intercept them, they might have outrun us to the border with Earth Country."

"I see," Kurenai said thoughtfully. "I agree with your reasoning, Hinata. Your decisive action not only saved two lives, but it also prevented a diplomatic incident, if not a war."

Hanabi let out a snort. Konohamaru shushed her, glancing worriedly back at Naruto.

Naruto didn't say anything, but he could feel his upper lip curling. Hinata really had saved their butts… so why was her sister being such a brat about it?

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The sun was setting and Naruto was very happy when they reached the camp so he could sit down for a moment… even if Hanabi didn't seem to think much of it.

Konohamaru, on the other hand, thought it was 'really neat'. Naruto knew he was training to become a ninja of the Leaf. Maybe this was a preview of what he might be doing in a few years when he'd have missions of his own. On the other hand, there was no telling what Hanabi's problem was.

After a moment, he rose to his feet and made his way to the nearby stream. The blood came off his hand fairly easily, as did the bloody mud that stuck to his pants. But the blood in his jacket had soaked in, and he really had to scrub to get it out. The heavy fabric was waterlogged before he was done. He grimaced and carried the folded jacket back to the tents, planning to dry it by the fire.

The evening air was cool on his skin, and the breeze ruffled his black t-shirt as he walked toward the fire. Konohamaru looked up and peered at him curiously. "What's that, Naruto-san?" he asked, pointing at Naruto's wrist.

Naruto peered down at the rounded bracer of leather and metal. "Ah, that's my wrist-weight. It helps me increase my speed and strength."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hinata look up suddenly, her expression chagrined. Kurenai wordlessly reached into her bag and handed Hinata her weights. Hinata accepted them with a blush.

Hanabi peered at him curiously. "What's the point of slowing yourself down with those?"

She hadn't noticed Hinata, for which Naruto was quietly grateful, so he answered her question, ignoring the tone. "If I wear these all the time, my muscles get used to moving with the extra burden… then when I really need it, I get rid of the weights and I move that much faster. Wearing these when you train is also good for building up your endurance."

"You spar with weights on?" Konohamaru asked, eyes wide.

"Yeah," Naruto said. "I learned about them sparring with an older shinobi named Rock Lee."

Hanabi let out a laugh. "I know him. He's that loud crazy baka that Neji-nii-san is saddled with on his team. I wouldn't do anything he told me to do."

"It was Gai-sensei's idea," Naruto said coldly, "who is Lee's sensei and must therefore be this Neji's Jonin sensei as well. Why don't you ask your 'Neji-nii-san' if his Sensei is a fool? That man knows more about taijutsu than almost anyone I can think of."

"NARUTO!" a loud voice cried out, making him cringe reflexively. "It warms my heart to hear you defend my teachings! You have truly not forgotten the fire of youth!"

"Gai?" Naruto gasped.

"Yosh, Sensei!"

"Lee…" Naruto said, rubbing at his eyes.

Gai and Lee leapt into the clearing, obviously practicing their "Dynamic Entry" jutsu. They were followed - less dramatically - by several ANBU in their distinctive animal masks, a large, rough-looking woman with red marks on her face and shaggy hair, a huge black dog, a man with long hair and white eyes, and a tall man with sunglasses and a large concealing full-length coat that had to be related to Shino. Tenten and a boy with the distinctive Hyuuga eyes rounded out the crowd.

Hanabi immediately ran toward the white-eyed man in long, flowing white robes. She quickly bowed before him and he nodded his acknowledgement. Hinata shakily rose from her seat and presented herself similarly… but her bow did not receive any acknowledgement.

The tall woman grunted and scratched the black dog's ears. "I told you the kids had been released," she grumbled. "Their scent trails held no hints of duress, and Kuromaru can *always* tell the difference."

"I am… surprised that those three were bested by a team of mere genin," the white-eyed man said. "It would be more likely that they had their prize stolen by Iwa-nin taking advantage of the Hokage's laxness."

Naruto scowled at that. Their counterparts across the border only tried something once… well, that they knew of. Still, they didn't seem eager to test them after that first confrontation.

"However unlikely it may seem, Hiashi-sama," the man wearing sunglasses replied in an urbane tone, "it would appear that those three missing-nins were, in fact, defeated by a genin team." The man turned toward Shino. "To what extent were you injured?"

"I sustained first degree burns to my right forearm, with some second-degree tissue damage in one spot on the top of my wrist,

along with mild smoke inhalation," Shino replied in a curiously detached voice. But then he frowned enough for his eyebrows to become visible. "Unfortunately, I was surprised by a seal-less fire jutsu and sustained significant losses to my colony. I estimate my kikai-jutsu capacity has been decreased by sixty percent."

The older man nodded slowly. "It was fortunate that you had not committed more of your reserves. However, when you accompany us back to Konoha, you can bind more to your queen to restore your colony."

But Shino shook his head. "Unfortunately, our relief is not due for another three days."

The large woman let out a loud bark of laughter. "I think the ANBU can cover for you for a couple of days. Your team looks like it went through a meat-grinder, you most of all."

"A-ano," Hinata said hesitantly, drawing annoyed glares from the two Hyuuga men that made her falter for a moment. "The Hokage ordered us to stay here until we received a specific written message," she continued quickly, ducking her head.

Naruto blinked. He was honestly surprised that she'd managed to get that out… not to mention a little proud of his shy team mate. "Hinata's right," he said loudly, drawing the attention of the angry Hyuugas. Not that he cared – they were probably idiots like Hanabi, anyway.

Gai-sensei frowned. "Kurenai?" he asked.

"My genin have accurately summarized our orders," she said, and the pride in her voice was unmistakable. "We would be failing to complete our assigned mission if we left the border now… unless you have specific orders from the Hokage?"

"Are you openly defying my authority?" the elder Hyuuga asked in a dangerous tone.

Kurenai lifted her chin. "Not at all," she said coolly. "But our orders came from the Hokage, and only he may countermand them. You, Hiashi-sama, are not part of that chain of command."

"No one wishes to usurp your mission, Kurenai-san," Shino's father said quickly, cutting off Hiashi and earning a glare of his own. "We merely thought your team was not in a condition to complete it."

"Your concern is appreciated," Kurenai replied politely, "but Hinata and Naruto are basically uninjured, and Shino's mobility is unimpaired. Additionally, the Rock ninja appear to be… less than eager to test our defenses."

"Were they scared off when we all arrived, sensei?" Lee asked Gai.

"No," Shino answered, shaking his head, "they think Naruto is the Fourth Hokage and are therefore terrified of him."

Naruto wanted to sink into the earth – without using a Doton jutsu – as the adults all turned toward him in shock. One of the ANBU snorted behind his mask. Naruto supposed Shino was getting payback for all the times he'd knocked him around during their latest sparring sessions. "Hey! They were standing a long distance away!" he grumbled.

"A *very* long distance," the wild-haired woman agreed, laughing coarsely, "if they though *you* were the Yondaime!"

Naruto scowled and stuck his lip out. The patient, watchful corner of his mind that Kurenai-sensei had been encouraging him to develop noted the way his antics had dispersed the tension in the air. Most of the adults were smiling slightly, except Hiashi-teme, who was glaring at him, and the other genins looked bored. At least no one was glaring holes in Hinata, or acting like they were going to try to force them to abandon their mission.

"However," the older version of Shino continued after a moment, "my son will still be operating with a significant handicap with his depleted

kikai swarm."

"My sentries are still in place," Shino replied calmly. "While I may not have as much directed capacity, Naruto and Hinata's capabilities have grown well beyond my projections. They will more than offset the deficit."

Naruto was a little embarrassed that Hinata puzzled out their teammate's words before he did, and was the first to turn toward Shino in mild shock. Was he actually praising their strength, in his own weird way? He found himself anticipating bragging about such an unexpected development the next time he saw Iruka-sensei… then his stomach tried to turn itself inside out and it was all he could do to control his facial expression.

"I am gratified that your first-hand observations have proven to be superior in terms of accuracy," Shino's father replied. "However, there may be another option. I will leave one of my smaller colonies with you, and replace it when I return."

"A-a second colony?" Shino said, stammering for the first time Naruto could remember.

"Yes," the man replied. "You are due to begin hosting a second group, as you are well beyond my own projections regarding your development. I commend your sensei for her suggested training regimen." He paused to nod slightly toward Kurenai, who returned the acknowledgment, blushing slightly. "We have already discussed the theory behind managing multiple queens," he continued, "just make sure their reproductive cycles do not conflict and you should do well."

"Thank you," Shino said as his father put a hand on his shoulder. Naruto tried not to make a face as a large number of bugs crawled out of the man's sleeve and flowed over Shino's collar. Just watching it made him itch between his shoulder blades. He knew Shino probably had him bug-tagged as a precaution – he just preferred not to think about it.

Naruto decided to casually look away before the compulsion to scratch became too strong. Gai-sensei caught his eye and nodded gravely. "I hope you are keeping up with your training," he said. "Lee has already increased his weights again."

Naruto grimaced. *Crap…* "I've sparred as much as I am able, but we've been working more on Jutsus and chakra control."

Gai planted his fists on his hips and struck what he probably thought was an encouraging pose. "That's all right, Naruto. You can practice those while you are away. Lee and I will get you back in shape when you return. I'll also want to hear about your battle. Those missing-nins were serious opponents, and I'll want to hear about your contributions to your team's victory."

Naruto made a face, but nodded and quickly changed the subject. There was a question that was eating at him anyway. "Er, do you think the, uh, funeral will be held before we return."

Gai frowned in confusion. "We won't hold a funeral for those criminals, Naruto. The ANBU will retrieve their bodies for study, but they deserve no better than that for what they did."

Naruto shook his head. "No, I mean for I-Iruka-sensei," he said in little more than a whisper. His throat was trying to close for some reason. Just saying it made it all too real.

Gai let out a laugh, which sparked a momentary rage in Naruto. "Iruka was badly injured, but he was found in time and brought to the hospital. Before the ANBU located the kidnappers' trail, I was told that he is expected to make a full recovery."

Naruto's eyes widened. "YATTA!" he screamed as he leapt into the air, pumping his fists. All the others were staring at him, some of them with obvious distaste, but he couldn't care less.

Gai, after a quick consultation with Kurenai, led his team on a quick circuit of the border zone "for practice" as Shino's father, Aburame Shibi, finalized the colony transfer to his son. Hiashi stood at the edge of the camp, his arms folded in obvious impatience, as the rough-looking woman (who'd been introduced as Inuzuka Tsume, Kiba's mother!), stood next to him, telling jokes to the silent ANBU; of course, she might have received more reaction if they had been *good* jokes.

Konohamaru joined Naruto in a relieved mixture of crying and laughter when he realized that he'd been wrong about Iruka. Hanabi looked like she was about to say something when Hinata suggested that she should report to their father. The younger girl looked sharply at her sister, her eyes widening slightly in surprise, but she didn't say anything before she stalked off.

"I'm glad Iruka-sensei will recover," Hinata said in a quiet voice.

"Yeah," Naruto said. "I'm sorry I kind of went nuts when Gai told me." He scratched at the back of his head as his face colored a little. Recalling the contempt of the Hyuugas' faces made him scowl.

"Is... is it a bad thing to care about people, Naruto?" Hinata asked. "It's not something… something you should be ashamed of, is it?"

Naruto frowned. Was she asking him or telling him? He wondered if she thought about that a lot. "I don't know, Hinata. We were told in the Academy that shinobi are supposed to be emotionless, but Kurenai doesn't seem to feel that way." He recalled how she encouraged him to think of his teammates as friends to be protected. Even if that was his role on Team Eight, she didn't seem to just think about it in that way. "That's good, too," he concluded after a moment, "because I don't want to be a ninja like that, do you?"

Hinata smiled shyly, shaking her head as her eyes veered downward.

"You were worried about your sister, weren't you?" he asked after a moment's thought. Konohamaru still sat off to the side, listening quietly.

Hinata hesitated before nodding.

"When you grabbed her from that missing-nin… you should have seen how you moved, Hinata. You were incredible!"

"I was?" she asked. "I don't remember… I just remember being scared she would be hurt."

Naruto shook his head. "You grabbed her and ran up that tree so fast I could barely see you. In a flash, you had her behind Kurenai and were cutting her free. Do you think you would have done as well if you didn't care?"

Hinata shook her head slowly.

"Good!" Naruto said, "and if caring about people is not the regular way for shinobi… well, we'll just make our own way of the ninja, right?"

Hinata looked up, meeting his eyes for once. "Right!" she said, her normally velvet-soft voice carrying a hint of steel.

Naruto couldn't help but smile at her fierceness, and she immediately looked away and excused herself, saying she needed to see about dinner. He frowned at her back as she walked toward the fire. What had he said wrong now?

He looked down at Konohamaru, whose face was scrunched up in a frown. "I like that nin-do, Naruto-san. I'm going to tell Oji-san that I want to follow that nin-do as well!"

Naruto made a chagrined face as Konohamaru stood up and walked over to get a better look at Tsume's enormous nin-dog, Kuromaru. He didn't want to think about all the trouble he would be in if people

thought he'd corrupted the Hokage's grandson into following some heretical nin-do. Of course, the aggravation it would give that stuck up ero-baka, Ebisu, might be worth it.

The blond genin sighed as he stretched before leaving to gather more wood to build up the fire. Hinata was preparing most of their stored meat and dipping heavily into the rice bag, using the largest collapsible pot to boil it. He supposed she was right to do so, if she planned to feed this many people.

Kurenai gave Naruto a pointed look as he returned with an armload of dead wood. She cut her eyes toward a very industrious Hinata and smiled slightly. Naruto nodded and left to get more wood. A lot more.

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The campsite smelled rather appetizing when Team Gai returned.

"Your system of semi-random paths is very devious," Gai announced in a grand voice. "It would be quite difficult for an intruder to anticipate your position at any particular time… especially if young Shino has made good use of his 'little friends', ha ha ha!"

Naruto did his best to show respect and not wince at Gai's… humor. Shino and his father nodded at each other and stood up. Naruto's ears could almost make out what sounded like a faint buzzing sound coming from them, but he couldn't be sure.

Hinata was setting out their entire store of eating utensils, and Tsume was eagerly walking toward the fire when Hiashi's voice interrupted them. "If the Aburames are done, we should leave now," he said.

"Hey, she just fixed dinner for us!" Tsume objected.

"It will soon be dark," Hiashi said in a patronizing tone. "We are very near a semi-hostile border. You may risk the Hokage's grandson if you wish, but I do not want my *heir* to linger here any longer than

necessary. Now that the Aburame is finished with his son, I insist that she be brought back to Konoha. With a full escort. Immediately."

"Hiashi-sama is within his rights to make such a demand," Shino's father said in a very bland tone. Naruto glanced at Shino out of the corner of his eye. He had some suspicions about when Shino talked like that, and they were now being confirmed. "We will return now. Kurenai-san, we will report to the Hokage as soon as possible. Understand that I will advise him to recall your team immediately for a thorough debriefing. Try to record any words the kidnappers may have said or any clues as to the identity of their employers. The direction of their flight may not be a completely reliable indicator of their objectives."

Kurenai nodded as the visitors all stood up. Naruto noticed Hinata hurriedly placed some of the rice balls and seasoned deer skewers into a folded cloth and quickly handed it to Tenten. The weary kunoichi smiled and bowed to the girl, as did Lee, whose stomach let out a low growl.

Naruto guessed they would be traveling fast, because the Hyuuga boy, Neji, picked up Hanabi and Gai lifted a protesting Konohamaru into his arms. They leapt into the trees, surrounded by most of the ANBU squad. Shibi, Hiashi, and the rest of Team Gai followed. Tsume scowled after them, but smiled when Hinata handed her another bundle of food. The jonin playfully mussed the girl's hair as she thanked her, then she followed the others into the trees, Kuromaru loping into the woods below her.

Still, when she turned back around, the blushing Hinata looked at all the remaining food she'd worked so hard to prepare and her face fell.

"Well…" Naruto said, racking his brains for something to say to her. "More for us! I'm really starving, and Shino is eating for three now!"

In all honesty, the fight *had* taken a lot out of him, so he joined his team at the cook fire and proceeded to stuff his face. Shino and

Kurenai also seemed unusually hungry as well. In the end, his stomach hurt, a little, but there weren't any leftovers from the large meal. Hinata's eyes had gone a little wide as Naruto continued to eat the simple, but well-prepared food.

When he was finally done, Naruto leaned back and patted his slightly distended stomach. He could barely move, and they'd have to hunt tomorrow, but Hinata was smiling, a little ruefully, at her teammates.

That night, as Naruto struggled to find a comfortable position to sleep in, he wondered about this new nin-do he and Hinata were going to follow. He'd need to think about this. A lot.

A/N:

Many thanks to my betas, Runsamok and bibliophile20.

It's a lot easier to get this done, now that my home computer is working again!

In case there was any doubt, nice, meaty reviews do motivate me to update sooner. Tell me what you liked about the chapter, which one-liners or cool moments really "made" it for you. Not only is it a motivator, it also helps me fine-tune my storytelling, and lets me know which jokes and references people are actually getting and what might be too obscure. Likewise, if something strikes an off chord, let me know too…

In response to some feedback, I've been playing around with a translator to get better Japanese names for my jutsus…

"Naruto Majutsu:"- Naruto's Special Technique (Sorcery)… Yes, it's a slightly grandiose title for a relatively simple technique, but remember who we're talking about here…

"Iwa" – Stone or Rock

"Doton: Wana" - Earth Release : Snare

"Katon: Gurando Fenikkusu Kachuu" – Fire Release: Grand Phoenix Vortex

"taishou" – boss

"Suiton: Gyoushuu" – Water Release: Condensation

"Katon: Okibi Shounetsujigoku" – Fire Release: Blazing Fire – Burning Hell

"nin-do" – literally ninja-way or way of the ninja

On a side note, some people seem to be equating "Raiton: Shokkingu Haji!" (Shocking Grasp) to the Chidori. Not even close. The chidori is a piercing (heck, armor-piercing) attack formed out of something that looks like electrical energy, but is bound into some sort of sharpened blade around the hand. Shokkinggu Haji is simple electrical generation. If you slammed one of those into Gaara's ultimate defense sphere, it would simply ground out into the earth.

Please address any general questions or concerns to my yahoo group, Viridian Dreams. The link is in my Author Profile.

-Matthew

# Revelations

Chapter Eight

Naruto did not sleep well that night. Of course, that was like saying that Uchiha Sasuke was a little stuck up, or that Sakura was *slightly* enamored of him.

In other words, a massive understatement.

He tossed and turned until dawn, sleeping fitfully for only a few minutes at a time. Each time he managed to drop off, he'd have such disturbing dreams that he'd thrash himself awake in short order, barely avoiding hitting Shino as he slept next to him.

He pondered the new ninja's way he and Hinata were going to follow as he first dozed off, but then he abruptly found himself reliving that fight again. He was strangling the fire-ninja, what was his name, Kouro? He could still feel the man's throat under his fingers, but it was the terror that shone in his eyes that Naruto couldn't forget. The man had been *afraid* of him, and worse, he'd *enjoyed* that fear… he'd lapped it up like his landlord's cat with a saucer of milk. He'd been disappointed when the fire grew too close to Hinata and he had to break the man's neck to stop his fire jutsu.

Naruto knew that a shinobi would sometimes be required to kill an enemy in order to complete his assignment. They even talked about it at the Academy, and an old man from the Hospital came and talked to each student privately after that lecture. Naruto grimaced. When he'd met with the man, oji-san said before dismissing him was that he doubted Naruto would have any problems. At the time, he'd thought he'd been praised and left with a smile on his face. Now, Naruto knew the man was making an oblique reference to the Kyuubi. After all, demons *enjoyed* killing, didn't they?

So in the depths of the night, Naruto stared up at the darkness inside the tent he shared with Shino and wondered if the villagers had been right all along. Only a monster would savor someone's fear like that. He already had the demon's red chakra running through his body… was it corrupting his mind as well? For a moment, he cursed Kurenai for teaching him to think things through, because now he could only lay there as his mind and emotions churned. It was said that power corrupts… How much more would that be true for power that flowed from a corrupted source? Inside him was the demon that wrecked Konoha and stole the life of its greatest leader. If it was corrupting him, shouldn't he try to do the honorable thing while he was still capable of feeling loyalty to Konoha?

At one point, he began to think about reaching for a kunai, but then he remembered the mission they were on. Shino was still injured, and most of their group tactics depended on Naruto, as back-up if nothing else. Also, if the Iwa-nins were afraid of him, they wouldn't press Team Eight for the last few days of their patrol. They needed him alive, at least until they made it back to Konoha. Then he could figure out what he needed to do. If something happened to him after they returned, the Hokage wouldn't send them on another dangerous mission until a replacement had been assigned. Maybe someone who wasn't stupid.

Naruto slipped the metal ring off of his finger a couple of minutes before his alarm was due to shock him awake. He wearily climbed out of the small tent, gritty eyes blinking at the gray light of dawn. He shrugged into his jacket, trying to ignore the small flecks of dark brown amidst the green of his sleeve. He'd need to take a trip to the laundromat when they returned, or would he? Naruto shook his head. He'd been up all night thinking, but he still didn't know what to do.

He gathered more wood for the fire, moving as silently as a wraith through the early-morning stillness. When he returned to the camp, Kurenai-sensei was awake, sitting near the fire with a folded map in her lap. Her red eyes were expressionless as she studied him. "How

did you sleep?" she asked, the concern in her voice evident, even to him.

Naruto shrugged, not trusting his voice.

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Hinata was a little sore when she awoke; for all that, she'd slept soundly. It was hard to believe that yesterday hadn't just been some elaborate fever-dream. She still couldn't recall what she'd been doing or thinking when she rescued Hanabi, but Naruto-kun said she'd been 'incredible'. The way he'd smiled when he said that made her stomach ache a little… mainly because she knew she was making more out of it than was really there.

Still, he wanted her to join him in his nin-do, that had to count for something, didn't it? Maybe one day, when he became Hokage, she'd be able to teach others his ninja way. It was doubtful that she'd ever qualify for ANBU, but maybe she could become one of the chuunins that guarded his office. That way she'd be able to see him almost every day. Surely he'd still have a smile for his old team mate, even after he became Hokage?

She smiled at this pleasant fantasy as she sat up and stretched. She had a few bruises and some stiffness, but she should be more than able to perform her duties within the team. She carefully pulled on her sandals and slipped out of the tent.

Kurenai-sensei was already awake, but Shino-kun was just emerging from the other tent. She offered to look at his arm, but he merely shook his head. "The pain is manageable, and it retains the necessary mobility. I am fine for now."

Hinata nodded, and then began pouring out some rice for a quick breakfast before their next patrol. She frowned as she set the pot on the embers.

"Ano, Kurenai-sensei," she said in a quiet voice, "is Naruto still asleep?"

"No, Hinata, he's been up for a while now," Kurenai said, frowning slightly. "I heard him several times in the night, so I don't think he slept very much at all."

"Is it because he ate too much?" Hinata asked, feeling slightly guilty. She had a feeling he'd eaten more than he really wanted so she wouldn't feel awkward about dinner. It wasn't fair if he suffered because her father was displeased with her performance in the battle. She was growing weary of her constant failures, especially when others paid the price.

"No," Kurenai said, shaking her head. Then she sighed. "He is… troubled by yesterday's battle."

"Why is that?" Shino asked, startling Hinata a little. He was so quiet at times that one almost forgot he was there. "He performed the best out of the three of us," he continued.

Kurenai took a deep breath, something Hinata had learned usually meant she was about to discuss something she didn't really wish to. "Naruto was forced to take a life yesterday, and I believe it was his first time."

"Naruto killed one of the kidnappers?" Hinata gasped.

"Actually, he dispatched Kouro and Kazuya both," Kurenai gently corrected her.

The camp was cloaked in utter silence for a long moment.

"That is… impressive," Shino finally said.

"Yes," Kurenai agreed, "but I think he still needs to come to terms with that. We should leave him alone while he works this out. You remember when this… issue was discussed at the Academy?"

Both genin nodded.

"Good," Kurenai continued, "then you know it will likely take a little while for Naruto to work through this. But he knows that he did what was necessary to preserve lives and insure the successful completion of our mission. I don't think he will forget that, but if he is quiet for a while, we shouldn't make a big deal out of it, all right?"

Hinata nodded along with Shino, though her stomach churned at the thought of Naruto in turmoil. Sensei was right, they just needed to leave him alone until he could work things out and recover his focus. The old man had told her that the first time was usually the hardest by far. It wasn't good to become callous toward killing, like many did, but one grew better at regaining focus afterward. Naruto worked so hard at everything he did that she had little doubt he would bounce back from this and be his normal self in no time.

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Unfortunately, Naruto did not return to his normally cheerful self that day. He was unusually taciturn as they ran their patrol route, responding to his team mates with little more than a grunt. Under other circumstances, Hinata might have been crushed, thinking she had angered him in some way, but he was so obviously distraught that, for once, such thoughts didn't even occur to her.

After they returned to camp, Kurenai mentioned that they should probably hunt so they will have some meat for dinner. Naruto curtly said that he would see to it. He left their camp so quickly that Hinata wondered if he really just wanted an excuse to be alone.

Naruto returned half an hour later, carrying an entire deer across his shoulders. He dumped it next to the fire without a word and stalked off. Hinata stared at the bloody offering. Kurenai gripped the kunai that was imbedded in the animal's skull, but she could only pull it out with obvious effort. The scrape of steel on bone was very loud in the otherwise-silent camp.

Hinata was annoyed to discover that she was pressing her index fingers together again.

"I will help you dress the meat, sensei," Shino said quietly, but Hinata looked up to realize that he was facing her, rather than Kurenai. As the two of them dragged the deer away from the camp to attend to this task, Hinata looked down at the gathered herbs she'd been organizing for dinner.

Hyuuga Hinata knew that she had many faults. She lacked confidence and the forcefulness her father said was essential for a strong leader. She was an inferior shinobi that inevitably dragged down the performance of her team, and she was indeed fortunate that they did not despise her for it. But she was not incapable of taking a hint.

She followed the path Naruto had taken from the camp. While she had been trained to follow people by noticing traces of disturbed vegetation or trampled grass, this was hardly necessary. All she had to do was follow the splashing sounds.

She found Naruto squatted by the small stream, scrubbing vigorously at his hands, which were already reddened from the rough treatment. He was muttering something under his breath that she couldn't quite make out, something about "over and done with".

For an unhappy moment she wondered if he resented her and Shino for not doing more during the battle. Perhaps if they had, he wouldn't have been forced to kill. Her steps faltered and she almost turned around.

But then she remembered that Naruto was seldom quiet when he didn't think something was fair. When they trained together, he wasn't cruel, but he also didn't mince words the few times he didn't think she was doing her best. He said he'd learned that from Gai-sensei, but after seeing the jonin's 'Dynamic Entry' technique, she wondered what else Naruto had learned.

At least her confidence in Naruto kept her moving forward toward the stream bank. As she approached, the blond genin's head swung around so fast that Hinata flinched back in spite of herself.

Naruto's scowl vanished in an instant as he looked chagrined. "Sorry," he muttered.

Hinata tried not to think too hard about what she was doing. "A-ano, Naruto… you don't… seem yourself today," she finally said

Hinata didn't understand how what she said could have struck a nerve, but Naruto's face immediately shut down. "Maybe because I'm not," he snapped.

Hinata was glad that her feet seemed frozen in place at his obvious signs of temper. That made it easier for her to stand her ground. "Ah, at the academy, the doctor who came in… he told me that the first time is usually the hardest," she said, looking downward.

"Really?" Naruto asked in a darkly sarcastic tone she'd never heard him use before. "Well, he told *me* he didn't think I'd have any problems at all… like I'm some monster that would probably enjoy killing," he added bitterly.

Hinata felt her stomach contract into a ball of ice, as much for his tone as for the words themselves. Why had the old man told Naruto such a cruel thing? The rage she'd felt burning in her heart when she faced the spy was back, blazing even hotter than before. "Did he really say that?" she asked in a quiet voice, her hands shaking as she clenched her fists as her sides.

Naruto nodded wearily, his expression puzzled.

"That's bullshit!" she *yelled* at Naruto, using a word she'd picked up from him in their training sessions.

Naruto flinched back like he'd been kicked, lost his balance, and fell into the stream. Hinata's hands flashed to her traitorous mouth as her eyes widened in horror. How could she have done such a thing?

Splashing and sputtering, Naruto struggled to his feet, water streaming out of his uniform. Hinata felt her heart breaking as she

realized what she'd done. He'd never forgive her for this. He might even ask to be transferred to another team. He'd definitely never train with her again.

Hinata began trying to formulate an apology of sufficient magnitude to salvage her friendship with her team mate as he wiped at his face, spat out some muddy water, and snorted.

And then he laughed.

It was more of a rusty chuckle at first, but it grew smoother and louder until he was halfway bent over, holding his knees for balance and whooping like a madman at the tops of his lungs.

Hinata was still frozen in place as Naruto sloshed back up onto the bank. He took off his jacket and began trying to wring it out. "And I just got this thing dry too," he muttered.

That statement seemed to snap Hinata's shocked awareness back into her body again. "I-I'm sorry, Naruto, I didn't…" she tried to apologize.

He waved off her apologies. "It was my own fault," he said. Then he cleared his throat and did a rough imitation of Iruka-sensei's voice. "But I am just shocked… shocked I tell you, at such coarse language!"

Hinata felt her face reddening. "I-I didn't mean to, I mean, I was just…" Her voice trailed off and she took a steadying breath. She raised her chin and looked Naruto squarely in the face. "He had no business saying something like that to you, Naruto-kun. That is what I meant to say."

Naruto looked up from plucking the soaked t-shirt away from his chest. "Maybe you were more accurate the first time," he said with a sigh. Then he peeled off the sopping-wet fabric.

Hinata abruptly turned and looked away. She listened to more water droplets hit the grass behind her as he slowly wrung out his shirt. He wasn't doing anything… provocative… but she was still intensely uncomfortable. This made her feel faintly ridiculous, as they'd been camping along the border for weeks now. Trying to distract herself, she thought about his ominous words as she arrived. "What did you mean about not being yourself?" she asked him without thinking.

Naruto did not answer at first. Worried about having given offense again, Hinata turned back around. Naruto was lost in thought, the t-shirt dangling from his fingers. He looked up at her after a moment, and then pulled it back on.

When he met her eyes again, Hinata was stunned to see something she hadn't expected to see. Fear. Her team mate, who killed two missing-nins to protect them the day before, was showing more fear than she'd ever seen in him before. Was it possible that the old man had been right, and that Naruto was some how destined to become some kind of mentally unbalanced killer? Something about that just didn't ring true though… this had to be bigger, much bigger to scare the future Hokage of Konoha.

Somehow, thinking about things bigger than Hokages let something begin to fall into place in her mind. "Does this have something to do with the red chakra?" she suddenly asked.

Naruto slumped to the ground like his legs could no longer bear his weight. He sprawled next to his damp jacket. "Yes," he whispered.

Hinata felt uncomfortably like an inquisitor, standing over him like that, so she gracefully knelt on the grass next to him. "I noticed the seal on your stomach, the first time you used your chakra pulse technique," she said slowly. "At first I thought it was some training method you used to build up your chakra. But I consulted all the scrolls I could find on seals, and the only things I could find that used seals that complex were-"

"Prisons," Naruto said quietly, cutting her off. He stared at her for a long moment, his expression indecipherable.

Hinata was almost afraid to breathe, wary of breaking this fey mood he'd fallen into. This was important; she knew it the same way she knew Naruto would find a way to become Hokage some day. But why was she almost shivering with fear?

"They never celebrate my birthday," he said slowly, his eyes never leaving hers.

"Why?" she asked in little more than a whisper, even as her heart wrenched with pity and that cold voice in the back of her mind told her that she didn't really want to know the answer to that question. Better to let things go on as they were…

Naruto sighed. "I was born on October tenth, twelve years ago," he said.

Hinata had always been the fact-checker for their group planning sessions, but everyone in Konoha knew what day that was. "That's the day the Kyuubi…" her voice trailed off as her eyes went wide.

Naruto looked down, but not before Hinata saw the light go right out of those bright blue orbs. "The Fourth Hokage couldn't kill it. No one could. So he sealed it into a new-born infant."

"You," Hinata whispered. It was an effort to even move her lips, as the enormity of what she'd just had confirmed crashed down on her.

"Yes," he said in a dead voice. "The Third Hokage made a law forbidding anyone from revealing that secret except me, so you can't say anything. But our mission will be over in a few days. After that, you guys can get a new combat specialist."

"Why…?" she choked out. Was he angry that she'd figured out his secret? Or had she pressed him too hard for answers? She clenched her jaw to keep from crying out in dismay.

Naruto shook his head like she was an annoying fly. "Why?" he asked in a puzzled voice. "Hinata, there's a demon inside of me! It almost got out when I was fighting those guys - I could have killed all of you!"

"Did you try to let it out?" Hinata asked, trying to suppress her revulsion at what had been done to him. To be honest, there was some fear as well. Her clan had suffered heavy losses when the Kyuubi attacked, losses they had yet to recover.

"No!" Naruto said quickly. "But… when I got the drop on Kouro… I was," he swallowed thickly, "strangling him, and he was terrified of me and all this red chakra that was pouring out of me. And I was enjoying his fear. He was blasting out all this fire, but it couldn't stop me. I kept squeezing until I saw the fire was about to reach you, then I broke his neck to stop it…" his voice trailed off and he raised his haunted eyes to hers.

Hyuuga Hinata had watched Uzumaki Naruto for years before they were placed on the same team. She thought she'd seen all his moods: happy, angry, frustrated, mischievous… but nothing like this. He looked… sad… and old, in a way. He seemed so lost and alone that she realized that much of what she'd admired before this day had been merely a mask. In a sense, she felt betrayed that her idol of confidence and determination had been revealed to have feet of clay. At the same time, her heart ached as she wondered how many people, if any, had ever seen this side of him.

"Naruto," she said gently. "I don't think a demon would care if I were burned or not."

"But that just means that our personalities may be mixing," Naruto insisted. "I care about what happens to you now, but what about next mission? Will I stop caring then and let you die?"

Hinata just shook her head violently, making her bangs rearrange themselves. "Not you," she insisted, "Never."

"You don't understand," Naruto insisted. "I was scaring him and I was enjoying it like some sick freak."

"Ano," Hinata murmured as she tried to get her emotions back under control. What she'd learned was huge, but she'd have to digest that later. Naruto needed her to be calm and rational right now. "Kouro is the one who burned you?"

Naruto nodded, but didn't say any more.

"Did he do other things to anger you, besides hurt you and Shino?" Hinata asked shrewdly.

Naruto's face reddened, but he just nodded and did not otherwise answer.

"Naruto, the old man told *me* that such feelings are normal in a violent confrontation," Hinata continued in a voice that was almost serene compared to earlier.

Naruto blinked. "Really?"

Hinata nodded.

"So you don't think…" Naruto began, but let his voice trail off as Hinata shook her head. "Are… are you okay with this, Hinata?"

She looked up at the almost pleading tone in his voice. Whether it was that or the haunted look in his eyes… *something* gave her the courage to lean forward and put her hand on his forearm. The skin was cool and damp from his recent dunking, but it warmed rapidly under her fingertips. "I… I would rather have you stay with Team Eight, N-Naruto-kun," she managed to choke out before her throat completely closed off.

Naruto gazed at her with something akin to wonder in his eyes, and it thrilled her to the core that *she* had made that dead look go away. She had made Naruto happy again, with just a few words. She was

more proud of that than any of the pitiful few triumphs of her life thus far.

"Thank you, Hinata-chan," Naruto said, smiling as she reddened even further.

His stomach made a hollow grinding sound, so long and so prolonged that it utterly shattered the mood. Naruto ducked his head sheepishly as Hinata quickly withdrew her hand from his arm. Her hand covered her mouth, concealing a shy smile. "I should be getting dinner started," she said as she gracefully rose to her feet.

Naruto grabbed his jacket as he rolled to his feet. He carried the damp fabric as he followed Hinata back to the camp.

"We have sufficient meat to last for the remaining duration of our assignment," Shino reported as Hinata rejoined them around the smokeless fire. He was carefully unwinding the bandages on his forearm.

Hinata nodded and began preparing skewers as Naruto ducked into the boys' tent. "Sensei," she said quietly and Kurenai looked up from the kunai she was sharpening.

"Yes Hinata?" Kurenai asked.

"I-I think you should talk to Naruto," she answered calmly, though she was still seething inside, "the counselor who spoke to him at the Academy gave him extremely poor advice."

"Why would he do that?" Kurenai asked, peering intently at her.

"A-ano…" Hinata said, her eyes flickering over at Shino for an instant, "I am not permitted to say," she replied.

"Does this have to do with the Kyuubi?" Shino asked in a perfectly normal tone of voice. Hinata froze in place.

Naruto's head shot out of the tent at the word 'Kyuubi'. He frowned at Hinata, who began stammering denials of having broken the law as he crawled out of the tent in a pair of shorts and a dry t-shirt.

"I am not stupid, Naruto," Shino said evenly, turning toward the boy and beginning to tick off points on his fingers. "You have a chakra capacity exceeding that of most jonin, even thought you have just become a genin. You can master highly chakra-intensive techniques with far more ease than you can master less demanding ones, suggesting that your chakra capacity is literally filled to overflowing most of the time. Even the most forthcoming adults of Konoha are strangely unwilling to discuss the reasons why you are shunned by most. There are no physical relics from the nine-tailed fox, even though our history texts state that it was slain by the Fourth Hokage. Your physical stamina is superhuman and you recover from minor injuries at a rate unprecedented for someone not under a physician's care. Your birth date is a matter of public record, as are the unusual birthmarks on your face. And finally, when we spar, I can have half my colony feed off of your chakra until they are replete and you do not even notice." He closed his hands and seemed to look Naruto squarely in the eyes. "I am neither stupid nor unobservant."

Hinata's mouth was hanging open, though she was relieved that Naruto knew she hadn't revealed his secret. Their sensei looked both proud and amused. The last member of their team was neither.

"You stuck your bugs on me when we sparred?" Naruto demanded, outraged. "That's cheating!"

"I was curious as to whether your increased speed was from chakra or purely physical conditioning," Shino replied.

Naruto made a face. "I am so smashing them if you do that again," he threatened.

"It would be useless to do so," Shino replied, "since you seem to have inexhaustible chakra reserves. It is also not good for the kikai to gorge on chakra."

"You get fat bugs?" Naruto asked, and then gave a shudder. "Nevermind, I don't want to know. Er, how long have you…?"

"I have suspected for a while. Our last sparring session at the inn was the last data I needed. I finalized my conclusions and eliminated the alternative hypotheses after we established our camp here. The only possible explanation for the observed facts was that the Kyuubi had been sealed to you or merged in a similar fashion." The bug-user looked down and began smearing a clear ointment on his burned wrist.

Naruto came out of the tent to sit down by the fire. In his black t-shirt and dark orange shorts he looked… younger, in a way. His weights were still visible on his arms and legs, but Hinata almost didn't even notice them anymore. He rubbed at his eyes and Hinata remembered sensei saying he hadn't slept well the previous night. "So Shino… do you have a problem with this? It being sealed inside me?" he asked.

"The Hokage would not have placed you on a genin team if you were dangerous in any way," Shino responded. "Our sensei is unusually solicitous of our physical safety, and she does not seem apprehensive regarding your presence. Your more unusual attributes, which I surmise are effects of the Kyuubi being sealed inside you, have proven to be an asset, both in training and during confrontations."

Naruto nodded slowly at this, but Kurenai-sensei spoke up. "You have spoken about the Hokage's motivations, as well as my own, Shino," she said. "What are your… personal observations?"

Shino glanced at their sensei with what Hinata might have considered annoyance, had it come from another. He paused briefly, and adjusted his glasses before speaking. "Based upon my interactions, I find the reactions of the villagers to be illogical and poorly thought through. Naruto bears them far less ill will than many others would in his position, something that would be impossible if he were being influenced or possessed by a demonic entity. Also, his

solicitude toward certain of his superiors and colleagues is at odds with such a negative characterization of his personality."

Naruto just blinked at their team mate. The he turned toward Kurenai-sensei.

"He's saying that you're too nice a person for him to worry about that," the jonin said with a sigh.

"Oh," Naruto said. He turned back toward Shino. "Why didn't you just say so?" he asked.

Shino did not answer, and instead began re-wrapping his bandages. Hinata moved to help him, but he waved her off, proving to be surprisingly dexterous with his left hand. Hinata went back to preparing the skewers while they all sat in silence. Naruto propped up his jacket and pants to dry near the fire, flashing a grin at her embarrassment, then began feeding small twigs into the flames. Kurenai took out a kunai and began slowly filing a nick out of the blade.

"Hinata?" Kurenai asked after a few minutes.

"Yes, sensei?" Hinata answered as she packed fragrant herbs around the sliced fragments of meat. Another pot of rice simmered over the coals.

"Why did you say I needed to talk to Naruto?" the jonin asked as she tested the edge of the kunai she'd been sharpening.

Hinata swallowed. She gave Naruto an apologetic glance. "Sensei, I do not believe Naruto received the proper… instruction at the Academy. On the subject we discussed this morning."

Kurenai-sensei's eyes widened as she seemed to understand what Hinata was hinting at. Hinata didn't want to repeat Naruto's painful words if she could help it. The idea of anyone saying that to

someone training to be a shinobi was awful… but saying it to someone like Naruto-kun was just… unforgivable.

Sensei seemed to share her opinion because her eyes narrowed and the air suddenly felt much colder. The three genins froze in place as the killer intent swept over them. It was fortunate that all of them knew they were *not* the target of this rage.

"Naruto, come with me," Kurenai snapped.

Naruto jumped to his feet and followed their sensei out of the clearing without a word.

Hinata swallowed and resumed preparing dinner, hoping that the familiar task would soothe her taut nerves.

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Naruto was thoughtful as he and Kurenai returned to their camp, following the appetizing smells of Hinata's handiwork. He was a little embarrassed that he hadn't really considered that the old man might have sought to sabotage him as much as the instructors who hated him. The old man was an expert on human psychology, which was why he conducted the counseling sessions… and he'd known his own subject well enough to know how to conceal his distaste for the Kyuubi's jailor. That's what made his false advice and assessment so effective.

But it didn't make Naruto feel any less stupid.

Kurenai's anger had been awe-inspiring, not to mention a little frightening. When they'd withdrawn far enough from the camp for a private discussion, she made him sit on a fallen log and tell her everything that was said during the counseling session. Before he was even halfway done, she was up and pacing as he talked. When he was finished, she turned away from him for a moment. Her hands moved too quickly to see and a trio of kunai imbedded in the trunk of the tree she was facing. That wasn't so unusual, but the fact that they'd penetrated halfway up the handles was.

After retrieving her kunai and taking several deep breaths, Kurenai-sensei explained what he *should* have learned at the Academy, before ever graduating, before even thinking about going on a mission.

As a shinobi of The Leaf, he would sometimes be placed into mortal conflicts, and inevitably would have to take a life. That was part of the job, and it didn't make him a monster to have done so. More important were the details. Was it possible for him to have avoided killing? Would avoidance have placed his team mates or his mission at risk? Or was he looking for excuses to kill? Was he antagonizing potential enemies in order to have an excuse to fight and kill them?

In that context, yesterday's battle appeared quite different. The enemy had struck the first blows, attacking Iruka and kidnapping Konohamaru and the bratty Hanabi. There was no question of letting them escape with their captives, even if Hinata hadn't already engaged them. With Hinata and Shino down, he and Kurenai were outnumbered… he just wished he hadn't been quite so *gleeful* with Kouro.

Kurenai-sensei seemed to share Hinata's intuition. "What did he say?" she asked. When Naruto just stared at her, she continued, "I was concentrating on a genjutsu, but I could hear that they were talking. I don't think you would have experienced such strong emotions in a combat situation without provocation; Gai and I both taught you better than that."

Naruto was silent for a moment. "The big one told Kouro to cook me so they could gang up on you. Kouro said he'd rather take his time with y-you and H-Hinata," he whispered as his nails dug into his palms. His hands still shook.

Kurenai quickly leaned forward, grabbing his shoulder and shaking him. "Naruto!"

"What?" Naruto asked, shaking his head to clear it of those memories.

"Try to calm down," she said. "Your chakra was spiking very strongly, and I could see a faint red glow around you. As I said before, you seem to tap into its chakra when you are feeling strong negative emotions."

"I'm sorry, Sensei," Naruto mumbled as he looked down. "I was just-"

"You were just acting in your role within the team," she finished for him. "A role I set for you and a role you fulfilled beyond my expectations yesterday."

"But Shino and Hinata got hurt!" Naruto protested.

Kurenai frowned. "I do not expect you to intercept every blow aimed at your team mates, Naruto. That would be an unrealistic, not to mention unfair, expectation to place upon you. I apologize if that was the impression I had given. Do you think Shino and Hinata are weak?"

"No sensei!" Naruto said quickly. He'd wanted to smack that brat Hanabi when she said that about Hinata.

"Good. They are shinobi of The Leaf, the same as you. Do not insult them," she replied. "They know the risks the same as you. While your abilities seem to be better suited for a direct confrontation, they are not helpless."

"But…" Naruto choked out as he struggled with his emotions. "They're my friends," he said in little more than a whisper. He looked up as he felt a hand on his shoulder.

Kurenai was sitting on the log again, smiling at him. "Was that so hard to admit, Naruto? You care about your friends. That doesn't sound like the behavior of a demon, or a hardened killer, does it?"

Naruto slowly shook his head. "I don't want anyone on Team Eight getting hurt," he said.

Kurenai gave his shoulder a squeeze, startling him as she removed her hand. "I know how you feel," she said quietly. "I felt the same way about my team when I was a genin. Killing an enemy is never something to be taken lightly, but when it is done in defense of another life… no one will fault you, Naruto."

"But I was… enjoying…" Naruto protested.

"Their threats made you angry, didn't they?" his sensei asked.

Naruto took a deep breath and nodded. He didn't even want to think about that again.

"That… person… also taunted you as we fought," Kurenai added. "While you did not allow him to goad you into making a mistake, it is understandable that you might feel a sense of… vindication… when you were finally able to come to grips with him. Does that make sense to you?"

"I suppose…" Naruto said in a dubious voice.

Kurenai sighed. "Given that you seem to tap into the red chakra easier when you are feeling strong emotions, there is a possibility that your prisoner will attempt to influence you at such moments. However, your behavior during that skirmish was well within the bounds of acceptable behavior for an active-duty shinobi. Stay on your guard the next time this happens and I am sure you will continue to make me proud to have you as a student."

Naruto felt like he'd been clubbed. "P-proud?" he stammered.

Kurenai just stared at him incredulously. "Naruto, you defended your team and defeated two enemies of higher rank. I am not sure I would have been able to defeat all three at once, so you quite possibly saved several lives yesterday. Do not let your concerns blind you to the fact that you performed your role well above my expectations."

Naruto felt like an idiot, sitting there with his mouth hanging open. But he was completely numb. An hour ago, he'd been thinking about… well, nevermind. Now, his sensei was telling him that what he'd done yesterday made her *proud* of him, and that he had done nothing he needed to worry about. It was almost too much for him to deal with.

Kurenai sniffed the air. "I think Hinata has dinner almost ready. We'd better get back or we'll hurt her feelings, right Naruto?"

He nodded dumbly and stood up to follow his sensei back to the camp. His mind was still trying to catch up, but he knew it would. Eventually.

---

Shino carefully flexed his right hand, feeling the dull ache as the skin pulled taut under the bandages. The medicinal cream Hinata loaned him was surprisingly effective at dulling the pain. When he asked her where she had purchased it, she shyly admitted that she'd made it herself. He wondered how she had become so adept at medicinal preparations, but he wasn't sure he really wanted to know.

While Naruto wasn't the most perceptive of shinobi, he had been able to sense that something… was not right with Hinata and the other Hyuugas. It was hardly his place to pry into the workings of another Konoha family, let alone a clan with the influence and secretive nature of the Hyuugas. However, once Naruto had raised his suspicions, it was almost impossible for him to not pick up on any clues that presented themselves.

He wondered if his team mate had done that on purpose, but that seemed unlikely. Naruto was hardly manipulative; he lacked both the awareness and the inclination to make use of others in such a way. He was, for example, still ignorant of Hinata's feelings for him, which was an impressive feat in and of itself.

He might have compared the Hyuuga girl's affection for Naruto to the behavior of Uchiha Sasuke's fan club, but for several key

differences. Hinata's behavior was far less forward than that of the kunoichis who pursued the last Uchiha of Konoha. She funneled her energies into improving her abilities by training with the object of her affections, a far more useful activity than pointless histrionics and bickering with 'rivals'. Not that Hinata had too many rivals, of course. And that brought him to the last major difference.

Given what he had seen of Uchiha Sasuke's behavior, he seemed less than interested in any of the kunoichis chasing him. As an object of romantic attentions, he was far too self-absorbed and taciturn to make an ideal partner. Rather, they seemed to be chasing an impossibly idealized mirage they had built up in their minds and dubbed 'Uchiha Sasuke'. They pursued the boy because they didn't really know anything about him. Hinata, on the other hand, seemed to understand Naruto better than anyone else… and it was only after being on the same team with them for months that Shino was starting to realize that.

Aburame Shino had always prided himself regarding his observational skills. He liked to think that he saw things as they were, rather than letting emotions or prejudgments cloud his vision, so this was a particularly galling conclusion to reach. Nonetheless, correct behavior required that he admit his error.

"Hinata," he said quietly, watching her turn the fragrant skewers over the coals.

"Yes, Shino?" she said, looking up.

"Do you recall our conversation at lunch the day we were assigned to Kurenai-sensei?"

Hinata didn't answer, but merely nodded, her eyes curious.

"Upon further consideration, I am forced to conclude that you were accurate in your initial assessment of Uzumaki Naruto, and I was incorrect," Shino said, trying to maintain his normal, precise diction.

Hinata frowned at him, which was somewhat unexpected. "Are you saying that because of… what you had confirmed today?" she replied, her voice somewhat sharp, which was even more surprising.

Shino paused to gather his thoughts before formulating a response. Hinata's friendship with Naruto was having an even stronger effect on her personality than he expected. It would remain to be seen if this would be fortuitous or not. "Not directly. However, I am beginning to realize the degree to which his learning environment was compromised by the rancor of the adults at the Konoha Ninja Academy. It was the subtle discouragement and negative feedback he received from the instructors that retarded his development, not a lack of focus or an unwillingness to apply himself. Observing his progress after he began working with jonins like Kurenai-sensei and Maito Gai has given me a much more accurate conception of his work ethic and overall capabilities. This has, in turn, drawn me to new conclusions."

Hinata's pupil-less eyes seemed to look right through him, even without the Byakugan active. Shino found himself somewhat uncomfortable under that gaze, which was another first. While he'd hoped Hinata would be able to coax Naruto out of his funk, he had no idea what passed between them while he and Kurenai dressed out the deer. Whatever transpired, it seemed to have had a significant effect on both of them. Naruto had revealed his secret to someone, probably for the first time, and it seemed to have galvanized the normally shy kunoichi. "What are your conclusions?" Hinata asked, snapping Shino's mind back to the present.

"I think you may be correct regarding his potential. With help, he may well become Hokage some day," Shino said.

Hinata's eyes widened slightly, and then she nodded. "With our help," she added.

Shino computed the probabilities of him recovering consciousness yesterday before one of the kidnappers killed him. Without Naruto's presence, they were marginal at best. "With our help," he agreed.

"Thank you, Shino-kun," Hinata said, smiling.

Shino straightened his glasses. "Konoha will prosper with a strong Hokage," he said.

---

Naruto felt almost giddy with relief as he sat down next to the fire. Shino and Hinata looked up as he and Kurenai returned, but Hinata just smiled and returned to her cooking while Shino… did whatever he did behind that collar of his.

"I'm sorry I was acting like a jerk earlier," he said.

Shino made a small noise that almost sounded like a snort.

"A-ano, Naruto," Hinata said as she carefully laid the hot skewers on the plates, "we understand now."

He smiled and scratched at the back of his head. It was a little uncomfortable, being around them after the conversations he'd had with Shino and Hinata. It was strange: he'd been dreading revealing his secret for so long, but once it was done, and nothing bad had happened, he still felt oddly exposed.

He slowly began to relax as they ate. Hinata had outdone herself again. He didn't know how she'd managed to gather so many fresh greens to go with the rice and meat, but they added a nice touch. It wasn't ramen, but it was really good. Maybe she used her Byakugan while they were patrolling…

As they ate, Kurenai discussed their plans for the remaining three days of their assignment. They would need to keep an eye out for their relief, but any shinobi without a properly-sealed scroll should be treated as potentially hostile. It was not unknown for an infiltration team to take advantage of the changing of the border guards.

When they finished, Naruto jumped up to collect the plates. When he bent over to get Hinata's, he gave her a big smile. "That was really

good, Hinata-chan!"

While she blushed, for once Hinata didn't look away when he said something nice to her. "T-thank you, Naruto," she replied in a small voice.

He gave Kurenai-sensei a big grin when he grabbed her utensils, which she returned with a raised eyebrow.

Shino's plate still had a little rice left on it. "You sure you ate enough for all those extra bugs?" Naruto asked him in a worried voice. "I don't want them chewing on me in the night if they get hungry."

Shino made an exasperated sound. "My allies receive more than adequate nourishment, Naruto. Furthermore, they are incapable of attacking humans in the absence of specific instructions from their host. The Aburame family has spent years breeding their kikai bugs for absolute obedience, and there have been no fratricidal incidents since they were introduced…" Shino's voice trailed off as Naruto's laughter could no longer be contained. Shino silently handed him his plate as Naruto got himself back under control again. "Idiot," he said as Naruto turned to walk away.

Naruto's laughter carried all the way back to the camp as he carried the dishes down to the stream.

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The following day's patrol was fairly routine. The Rock ninjas seemed just as reluctant to test their vigilance again, a fact that never failed to bring a smile to Naruto's lips. He wondered how badly they would freak out once he became Hokage…

Thinking about why they feared the fourth Hokage wiped the smile from his face. As he leapt from tree to tree he remembered his shock at thinking the fourth Hokage had killed people. Kurenai said that things seemed to have gotten more serious after one of his students was killed. Now he had at least some idea of what they'd been talking about.

If he'd been willing to kill to protect his team, how would it be for the Hokage, who was supposed to protect the entire village. Would he be ready to do what was necessary to protect everyone? Would he even be able to live with himself if was forced to wage war to protect his people?

Since the ambush, Naruto had fallen into the habit of keeping an eye on Hinata as they traveled through the trees. It only made sense, given that she was usually the first to sense danger with her eyes. But watching the Hyuuga girl leap from branch to branch also supplied him with his answer. He remembered how relieved he'd been when he realized that Shino and Hinata were all right. Yes, he could do what was necessary to keep his precious people safe.

As they were looping back toward camp, Hinata stopped suddenly. Naruto's hands were already forming seals as her head snapped to the side. She held one hand behind her back, with three fingers extended. Shino dropped silently to the ground and Naruto knew his bugs were already in motion. Hinata and Kurenai changed directions and leapt into a tree to the left of their original course.

Naruto followed them; accelerating so he was able to land next to them when they touched down to confront the trio of interlopers.

They wore the masks and hooded robes that just shouted "ANBU" to any resident of Konoha, but Naruto didn't relax at all. Kurenai said they needed to beware imposters, and she and Hinata would be right in the middle if a potential battle broke out.

"Can we help you?" Kurenai asked coolly. Naruto noticed a couple of kikai bugs pass by his feet, heading toward the intruders.

"We're your relief," the middle ANBU said in a bored tone, his voice slightly muffled by the boar mask.

"You're early," she observed.

"Hokage's orders," the ANBU replied laconically.

"Do you have proof?" Kurenai asked.

The boar-masked ANBU slowly pulled out a scroll tube and tossed it to the jonin.

Naruto blurred into motion, snatching the scroll out of the air and pivoting so his body was between it and his team. "Hinata!" he barked.

The ANBU dropped into defensive stances as Naruto braced himself for an explosion or attack.

"It's all right," Hinata said quickly, her pale eyes glowing in the afternoon sunlight. "Just paper and ink. No chakra."

Naruto relaxed slightly, and handed the scroll to Kurenai. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her closely examine the seal before breaking it and scanning the message.

"Suspicious little bastard, aren't you?" the boar-masked ANBU asked in a conversational tone. "But you'd do well not to startle us. Someone could have gotten hurt."

"It's authentic," Kurenai said after a moment. "And it's probably not a good idea to startle us, either." She nodded her head toward the thirty or so Narutos dropping out of the trees behind the ANBU.

"We sensed them," the crow-masked ANBU spoke up. "It's a lot of Bunshin, but they're hardly likely to distract us from you."

Kurenai smiled sweetly as they turned to leave for their camp. "Not Bunshin," she corrected. "Kage Bunshin."

One of the clones, smirking, smashed his fist into a tree, splintering the bark. The ANBU twitched at the sudden sound.

---

It only required a handful of minutes to break down the tents and pack up their equipment. Hinata left most of the meat and gathered greens for the ANBU to use, but Naruto made a special point of gathering the leftovers from Hinata's cooking. She blushed a little when he said that it was too good to leave for strangers. He was starting to get an idea of why she acted so weirdly when he complimented her, but he didn't like where his thoughts were taking him. So he left it alone for a while.

Within the hour they were on the road back to Konoha. Naruto felt some of the tension flow out of his body as they left the borderlands. It would be good to return home, where hot showers and ramen could be found; the latter in *large* quantities. As he adjusted his heavy backpack, he glanced over at Hinata. She didn't seem to be as eager to return.

Naruto thought about that a lot as their steps carried them home.

A/N:

Many thanks to my betas, Runsamok and Bibliophile20.

Well, he finally told them… but Naruto isn't the only one with secrets now, is he?

For all the people wondering why Naruto didn't angst out over killing people in chapter 7… Normally people don't get react to traumas like that immediately, especially if there is a lot of adrenalin involved. Between the combat and hearing about Iruka being dead, and then 'not dead', he had a lot on his mind. It's later, when he has time to reflect that it will start to bother him. Psychologically, that is *much* more realistic than the instant angst-fests you see in bad melodrama.

Please address any general questions or concerns to my yahoo group, Viridian Dreams. The link is in my Author Profile.

-Matthew

# Returning to Konoha

Chapter Nine

Yuuhi Kurenai couldn't recall ever being quite so relieved to see the familiar skyline of Konoha again. The only time that even came close was when she returned alone that time… but she'd been too numbed by the death she had seen to feel much of anything. She was annoyed to find herself unconsciously smoothing her sleeve, but the fabric wasn't stiff with Mattai's blood.

Perhaps Sarutobi was correct about her living far too much in the past.

She glanced back at her genin team, proud of the way they maintained their formation and remained alert. Only the occasional smile from one of them indicated that they weren't still in the border zone.

Shino, of course, was as reserved and taciturn as usual, even disregarding how little of his face was visible. Hinata had been quiet since they'd received orders to return to Konoha, and her face seemed to settle into a mask as the gates appeared in the distance.

No, it was Naruto who was different. The blond genin had changed since the day he'd finally revealed the truth to his team mates. Kurenai wasn't normally one to become overly smug, but she'd been exactly right about the effects of him opening up to Shino and Hinata. A weight, present for as long as she'd known him, seemed to have lifted from his shoulders. She knew that her acceptance of him had made a difference, but the acceptance of his peers, especially given the implications of the Hokage's law, seemed even more crucial.

Rather than rejecting or fearing him, as the Sandaime seemed to fear, Hinata and Shino had accepted the presence of the Kyuubi

within Naruto in as positive a way as Kurenai could have hoped. Indeed, if what she'd pieced together was correct, Hinata had reacted in a rather… violent… way to the implication that Naruto was a monster. Nothing else could explain the distant shout that had carried up from the stream.

Kurenai grew more concerned for her other students now. After her father's abominable behavior at their camp, she wasn't surprised that Hinata seemed to dread returning to Konoha. More surprising was the undercurrent of anger she seemed to sense in Shino. The boy was as quiet as ever, but his forehead, the only portion of his face fully visible, seemed to be furrowed with a frown more and more often. When she'd asked him if anything was the matter during a rest stop, he'd merely said that he was "being forced to re-evaluate his assessments of a large number of parties". This was unusually opaque, even for an Aburame, but he seemed to be feeling an echo of her own anger regarding how Konoha dealt with… certain issues.

All the same, she needed to caution the boy to be circumspect. If her suspicions were true, there might be a deeper issue than simple bigotry – not something a genin should be directly involved in, no matter how talented he might be. She supposed she might be hopelessly paranoid, but she'd rather that than to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Maybe Umino Iruka would be ready for a visitor after they reported to the Hokage.

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Aburame Shino let his body move automatically, his team mates and allies alert for danger, while his mind composed a list of people.

At the top of the list, of course, were his parents, especially his father. While he appreciated the strictures the Hokage's law forced him to operate under, Shino did not appreciate the paucity of hard information that his clan had acquired before formulating their opinion of Uzumaki Naruto. He hadn't missed the concerned silence among many of his relatives when his team assignment had been

announced. Even more galling was the realization that he'd allowed their unreasoning distaste for the prankster to color his own opinions while they were both students at the Konoha Ninja Academy.

Shino did not know whether it was more annoying to realize he'd been wrong, or that he'd picked up their attitude without realizing it. Either way, it was past time for him to realign some peoples' attitudes to make them more congruent with the reality of the situation.

In short, he was *highly* offended.

That was the only word that really fit. His clan had compromised the integrity of his logic and his objectivity. And that was completely unacceptable.

Not for the last time, Shino heard the low buzz as his new colony became agitated. He forced himself to let his aggravation abate. It would not do to upset his new allies.

---

Hinata felt her stomach contract with dread as the gates of Konoha appeared in the distance. She loved her village, but in this situation, she dreaded what the sight of it symbolized. Their mission was coming to an end.

The border patrol had been a dangerous, dirty, strenuous job. Her muscles still ached, with or without the weights, from the endless patrols they'd run. Despite bathing in the stream as often as possible, she still felt grimy, and her jacket was several shades of grey darker than when she left, due to the build-up of ground-in dirt. She'd been in dangerous situations more than once, and if it hadn't been for Naruto, she would likely have died trying to rescue Hanabi.

Yet, it had also been one of the happiest times of her life.

It was puzzling at first, the joy she'd taken in such a difficult mission. It wasn't until she thought back on her father's visit to Team Eight's camp site that it began to sink in. It was reasonable for him to join

the pursuit of Hanabi's kidnappers, and to make sure every means was used to secure her freedom and guarantee the safety of the Hyuuga bloodline.

Nonetheless, it had felt… *wrong* … for him to be there. The camp site that they had spent so much time preparing, the camp that had witnessed so many meals and idle conversations with her team… it felt violated by her father's presence. When Hinata realized that she didn't want him to be there, she was initially scandalized by her blatant disrespect. He was her father, and more importantly the head of the clan. She should have felt honored by his presence, however fleeting.

She tried to make him and the others feel welcome, preparing as good a meal as could be managed in such rustic surroundings, but she was too slow and that had been thwarted as well. Even now, her face burned at the thought of all the wasted food – the sign of a foolish host. She regretted it later, but she'd been gratified that Naruto and Shino ate so much, even as she realized that they were doing it solely to save her feelings.

Just thinking about her team mates made her wish they were leaving for another patrol, rather than returning from one. She knew she'd sleep better in the small tent she shared with Kurenai-sensei than in her soft bed in the Hyuuga compound. A place where no one wanted a failure like her.

---

Naruto's heart sped up when he saw the gates of Konoha. Their mission was coming to an end. More importantly, everyone was returning under their own power. Shino's burned wrist was hardly more than an annoyance at this point, and the larger boy made a point of sparring with Naruto more than once on the way back. Shino was a little careful how he blocked with that arm, but when Naruto found himself unconsciously easing up on his team mate, the bug user blew him off his feet with a side-thrust kick that drove the air from his lungs.

Naruto shook his head at the memory of rolling to his feet, gasping, only to see Shino standing in a taijutsu stance, right arm extended and making a "come here" gesture with his fingers. After that he relaxed and went all out against his friend, and they were both thoroughly bruised within half an hour.

*Friend* . That word again. He wondered if Kurenai-sensei ever got tired of being right all the time. It made a huge difference to know that Shino and Hinata knew about the Kyuubi, and just didn't care. Moreover, Shino figured it out on his own, and Hinata had guessed. His team mates would have to have been extremely dense or self-centered for him to be able to conceal his differences for much longer.

But they knew, and more importantly, they accepted him. He didn't think he'd ever forget the shock when Hinata had just *exploded* like that. He never imagined that she could ever get angry like that, but watching her get absolutely furious on his behalf – that was an odd feeling. Unsettling… but nice.

However, as they returned to Konoha, the kunoichi became increasingly quiet and withdrawn. Naruto wasn't the most perceptive shinobi in his class, but the change in her demeanor was more than obvious to him. It was puzzling, especially in its timing. They were leaving the danger zone now, and returning to a safe area – as safe as any village full of shinobi, that is. Naruto was looking forward to some civilized amenities involving heated water – ramen and showers – and he would have thought Hinata would as well. At least the showers anyway.

Instead she looked increasingly uncomfortable as they approached the gates. He wondered about some things he'd learned during their mission. Hanabi was a brat, of that there was no question. Naruto had no siblings, but he'd heard Kiba complain about his older sister often enough to realize that brothers and sisters didn't always get along.

On the other hand, her father *should* have been proud of the way Hinata had rescued her sister. Instead, he and that jerk cousin of hers looked at Hinata like it was her fault Hanabi had been kidnapped in the first place. Naruto didn't understand it. But he didn't have to understand it to know he didn't like it.

Uzumaki Naruto rubbed at the back of his head as he thought it over. Thinking like this wasn't one of his strengths, but Kurenai-sensei had been pushing him more and more to see 'underneath the underneath'. It was a really goofy phrase that meant trying to understand all the subtle undercurrents in a situation. It was a good skill for a shinobi to develop, because on a mission, unseen things could end your life. On the other hand, Naruto didn't think it was supposed to be applied to understanding kunoichis.

But for all that, it wasn't too hard to put together. He remembered how tired and sore Hinata had been from that special Hyuuga training, and how she seemed to revive once they were out in the woods. He remembered the long hours she volunteered to do extra training with him, and her embarrassed silence when he'd asked if her family wouldn't object to her working so late and missing dinner. Combining that with the cold way her father had treated her at the campsite led Naruto to only one inescapable conclusion.

Hinata's family sucked worse than cold ramen.

Naruto was about to congratulate himself on his perceptiveness when the natural follow-up question left him stumped. What could he possibly do about it? He didn't think beating the crap out of Hyuuga Hiashi would help, even if he were capable of such a thing. Puzzling over this eroded any sense of triumph he'd gleaned from his realization. Furtive glances at his team mate seemed to confirm his guess, as her gaze seem to sink lower and lower toward the ground as she approached the walls of Konoha.

Naruto's mood sank as well. Even though he thought he knew the source of the problem, he couldn't think of anything he could do to help. He hated feeling helpless, especially when one of his friends

was hurting, but how could he protect her from her family? He let out a sigh as they passed through the gates, causing Yuuhi Kurenai to glance back at him.

*Maybe Kurenai-sensei will know what to do* , he mused. A little weight seemed to lift from his shoulders at the thought. He'd never seen her at a loss before.

Well, maybe except for that one time with the Lee-spandex-Henge.

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In accord with standing orders, no sooner had Kurenai reported to the Chuunin guarding the Hokage's door than they were ushered into his office. The old man was concerned, but he still smiled as Team Eight filed into the room and stood before him. They stood at attention, but he waved over one of the Chuunins and folding chairs were brought for all of them.

"This may take a while, he explained. "But before we begin your official debriefing," he began, setting down his pipe, "I want to personally thank you for my grandson's safety. Konohamaru still grumbles about having to be saved by his 'eternal rival'," the old man paused, smiling as Naruto rolled his eyes, "but I can tell from his eyes that it was a very close thing. I can't tell you how relieved I am, or how proud I am that you are all shinobi of The Leaf."

The three genin all looked down, clearly embarrassed from his praise.

The Hokage cleared his throat and asked Yuuhi Kurenai to make her official report. He listened intently as she summarized the events of the last few weeks, but he did stop her at some points for clarification.

"They mistook Naruto for the Yondaime?" he asked, both startled and alarmed at that revelation.

"That is correct, Hokage-sama," Kurenai confirmed. "The Iwa shinobi grew quite alarmed at his presence, but they did not seek to test our vigilance again after that initial confrontation."

Sarutobi rubbed at his chin as he pondered this. "A quiet border is a blessing, but I will send a communiqué to our representative in Earth Country to explain their mistake. I would rather they did not feel that we were provoking them in such a fashion."

"Send them my grades from the Academy, oji-san," Naruto said with a grin. "Let them know they were scared of the 'dead last' in his class."

The Sandaime was shocked by two things. The first was the fact that Naruto would make a joke about his poor grades in the Academy, something that had previously been a sore point with him. He couldn't imagine him bringing *that* up, even for the opportunity to make someone else look foolish.

The other was the reactions of his team mates. The little Hyuuga girl turned toward Naruto, eyebrows drawing together and mouth half-opened. She hesitated, and the Hokage imagined that his presence was the only thing preventing her from protesting Naruto's words.

Even more surprising was the Aburame boy's reaction. He merely turned his head and glared at Naruto. Well, it was impossible to see his eyes, but his body language was unmistakable.

Naruto's reaction supported the Hokage's assessment as well, for he immediately flushed and scratched the back of his head, smiling sheepishly. "I was just kidding," he mumbled. Beside them, Kurenai kept her face immobile, but her eyes were dancing with a mixture of pride and vindication. Sarutobi gave her a small nod of agreement. He was gratified to witness that Naruto was less defensive, and that he had made such loyal friends of his team mates. Perhaps one day the boy would be able to share his secret with others of his generation.

The light mood darkened as Kurenai began to describe the battle against the kidnappers. He was a little surprised to learn that the Hyuuga Hinata initiated the engagement, but her sensei made a point of explaining the rushed nature of the interception and how she fully supported Hinata's reasoning. He also noticed Naruto nudging the girl, who was looking down and blushing.

"Yuuhi Kurenai is not one to lightly praise another's logic," the old man observed, making Kurenai grimace as the girl's blush deepened. "The ability to make sound judgments on the spur of the moment is not one to take lightly."

"Arigatou, Hokage-sama," the girl said in a quiet voice.

As Kurenai described the battle, which had been as brutal as it was abrupt, the Hokage's tension was only visible in a slight tightening of the weathered skin around his eyes. One of the hardest parts of this job, at least for him, was hearing about the battles of his shinobi after the fact, too late for him to do anything about it. The blood was already drawn, the lives ended. The only thing he could do now was try to draw as many lessons as possible from the now-concluded missions.

He winced internally when he learned of Shino's burns, but the bandages on his arm were compact, and he did not seem to favor it. He grew alarmed for other reasons when he heard how Hinata was stunned by a lucky hunk of ice. With only Kurenai and Naruto facing three opponents…

"At this point," Kurenai continued, "I heard Naruto shout as I fought Lisuke. He successfully drew on the Kyuubi's chakra and used it to shield him from the flames so he was able to close with his opponent and…"

She stopped as the Hokage's hand slammed down upon the desk. He stared at his jonin, wondering what had possessed her to break the law concerning… and then he noticed that her genin were all staring at him. And while they might have been startled by his

outburst, they didn't seem to have reacted to her casual mention of the nine-tailed fox.

"They already know," Naruto said quietly, his voice sounding far too old for the energetic prankster he knew. "Shino figured it out on his own, and Hinata mostly guessed it. But I confirmed it, so no one broke your law."

"And we did not run screaming into the night," Shino murmured. Hinata frowned, and Sarutobi noticed her hand twitch, like she wanted to reach out to her team mate, but the motion ended almost as soon as it began, and he doubted anyone else even noticed.

"Naruto… " the Hokage began, then stopped to consider his words. "It's good to know that they accept you. Perhaps I was being too cautious when I made that law, but I decided to err on the side of caution regarding your future."

Naruto looked up and locked eyes with the Third Hokage. "I understand," was all he said, but it still shook the old man to his core. The boy's eyes were an odd mixture of emotions: anger, sadness, and loneliness so poignant it shriveled his soul. But overriding all the rest was another emotion: forgiveness. Maybe there were better ways the whole situation could have been handled, but Naruto acknowledged that he'd tried his best.

It was both a liberating and a humbling experience. He wondered what else the boy had gone through during the mission.

Kurenai continued her narrative. He was a little shocked and saddened that Naruto had been put in the position of having to kill two of the kidnappers. But all that was forgotten when he heard the words "…and I learned that his psychological preparation at the Academy had been sabotaged. However, we were able to discuss what he should have learned, and…"

"Sabotaged?" he asked sharply.

"Yes, Hokage," she replied. Her voice was calm, but her eyes were not. Naruto looked somewhat uncomfortable, but his team mates were staring at their Hokage, almost daring him to speak.

"Give me a written summary of his actions," he said in a hard voice. "Once I have reviewed it, I will have him brought to Ibiki."

"Thank you, Hokage-sama," Kurenai said. Naruto and Hinata looked mystified, but the Aburame boy merely nodded approvingly. Sarutobi had little doubt that Aburame Shibi had acquainted his son with the names of Konoha's important shinobi. The chief interrogation specialist would definitely be on his list, the old man mused as Kurenai resumed her report.

When she was done, the Hokage gave each of them a labeled envelope. "Here is your pay for an extended C-class mission," he said. He then took out three more envelopes with official Konoha seals on them. "These are for the three missing nins that were eliminated," he continued. "There were substantial bounties placed on their heads by their home villages, as well as other people they'd committed crimes against." He gave one of the envelopes to Kurenai, and tried to hand the other two to Naruto, but the blond boy shook his head.

"Naruto," Kurenai said gently. "You've saved some people a lot of trouble by your actions. It's all right to accept this reward. For many of their victims, offering a bounty is the only way they can strike back at someone who had hurt them or their family."

"That's not what I mean, Sensei," Naruto corrected her, his voice grave. "I understand the rewards, but these two shouldn't be for me alone. We fought as a *team* . I mean, I wouldn't even have seen them if Hinata hadn't spotted them through their genjutsu, right?"

"Ano, Naruto, it's all right," the girl said hesitantly. But the boy just shook his head stubbornly.

"By the rules, Naruto struck the killing blows," Kurenai observed. "But that means the money is his to do with as he will. If he wishes to share with his teammates, then so be it. I can get all three of these vouchers cashed and we can split the rewards."

"Ah, sensei," Naruto said quickly, "I didn't mean you had to-"

Kurenai cut him off with a gesture. "I just happen to agree with you, Naruto. And am I not a member of the team as well?" She turned back toward the Hokage. "You will have a written report of my observations by tomorrow morning," she promised in a tight voice.

The Third Hokage of Konohagakure dismissed Team Eight with a bemused smile on his face. He really should have talked Kurenai into taking a genin team long before now. He hadn't seen a team that seemed so in tune with each other since…

It was hard, dreadfully hard, not to let other faces over-shadow the young ones before him. His own genin, that grew up to become the Sanin, the Yondaime's first--and last--genin team, the Nara-Akimichi-Yamanaka trios that seemed to crop up in each generation… They were all unique, really. The human mind just tries to find patterns to make sense of life, even when there are none to be found.

But it didn't require a historical perspective to realize that Kurenai's genin had grown together as a team, and had done so to a greater extent than many experienced shinobi even realized was possible. Hatake Kakashi might understand, when he wasn't too distracted by the ghosts of his past.

And while Kurenai had done an excellent job assembling her team, much like a skilled mason might build a brick wall capable of withstanding anything, the Hokage also realized something else. While Kurenai was the mason, Naruto was the mortar that held them all together. Their acceptance had given him something he'd always craved without even being able to understand why. But at the same time his awkward and often foolish demeanor masked a drive and a… wisdom… of a sort that the Sandaime only caught rare glimpses

of during their infrequent talks. For someone with few real friends, Naruto was amazingly open and accepting. As he'd anticipated, once someone showed the boy some simple kindness, they discovered they'd also made a friend for life... one of surprising loyalty and determination.

The Third Hokage sighed and rubbed at his eyes. He got up from his chair and paced around his office, wincing at the pops and crackles as his old bones realigned themselves after sitting too long. He paused near the window and looked out across his beloved Konoha, toward the Hokage monument. His eyes lingered on the stone visage of his successor, and, sadly enough, predecessor as well.

"You did better than you knew," the old man whispered before returning to his paperwork.

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Oddly enough, Kurenai did not immediately dismiss them once they left the Hokage's office. Naruto frowned a little when she said they had one more task to perform as a team, but that ended the moment she said it was a tradition she'd learned from her old sensei.

It didn't take a genius to realize that Kurenai-sensei *never* talked about her original team, except in the most general of terms. Having been around shinobi much of his life, Naruto noticed how many of them would mention their old teachers or team mates. According to Shikamaru's complaints, his father did little else when they talked, much to the lazy boy's annoyance. However troublesome such habits might be for others, it only made the exceptions to the rule that much more noticeable. Naruto was curious as to why Kurenai never talked of them, but he hesitated to ask. Kurenai was a very private person in some ways, despite her forthright nature, and he suspected that her reasons for not speaking of them were sad ones.

It wasn't that Naruto ever forgot that they were all shinobi, trained assassins who could be assigned any mission, no matter how dangerous, for the good of their village. But after a while the dangers just seemed so *normal* , that it was hard to keep them in the forefront

of his mind. And perhaps that was for the best, because every time he even considered the possibility of losing his team mates on a mission, his mind sheered away from the enormity of that potential loss. Not for the first time, he realized that he literally would rather die than suffer the loss of one of the few people that cared for him. Kurenai-sensei said that she never expected Naruto to intercept every attack aimed at Shino or Hinata, but that was exactly what he wanted to do. He'd do whatever it took to keep his friends safe. Anything at all.

Naruto felt the hairs on the back of his neck begin to rise and realized with a start that the unnatural chakra he'd felt during the battle was returning. Remembering Kurenai's words, he took a deep breath and made an effort to calm himself. He clenched and unclenched his hands, trying to ignore how sharp his fingernails were becoming, and hoping that his canines didn't look as large as they suddenly felt. He looked up at his team mates, to remind himself that they were all right. Shino was walking silently beside Kurenai, hunched inside of his spare trench coat. Hinata was walking beside Naruto, seemingly lost in thought.

Though she walked with her eyes downcast, Naruto noticed that she'd fully adapted to her weights, and walked as gracefully as ever with their mass added to her arms and legs. Somehow the sight of her seemed to calm him, quelling the rising tide of anxiety about the future that wanted to overwhelm him. He could feel his body returning to what, for him, counted as normal.

Almost as if she were sensing his thoughts, Hinata glanced toward Naruto, only to jump a little when she locked gazes with him. Her face turned red and she clasped her hands together. "A-ano?" she asked hesitantly.

"Looks like you're ready to increase your weights again, Hinata-chan," Naruto said brightly, relieved that the anxious pressure building inside of him was draining away.

"Oh!" Hinata said, looking crestfallen. "S-sorry," she stammered, "I should have noticed sooner, a-and-"

Naruto frowned and her words cut off suddenly and she looked away. Why was she always apologizing for things that were not her fault? "Er, you know, Hinata, we've been out in the woods for several weeks. It's not like you could buy extra weights from a squirrel."

The kunoichi didn't respond to his lame attempt at humor, and just looked down at her feet as they walked.

Naruto sighed. He didn't know why his words always came out weird when he talked to Hinata, but he was getting tired of it. "Look," he said. "I was just trying to say that you've fully adapted to wearing the weights, probably because you work really hard and probably slept with the damn things on. I need to get more weight added to mine as well. I'm sorry if it came out wrong, but I was trying to say 'Nice work.' And I'm really glad you're on my team, too. I can't picture Ino or Sakura working as hard as you have." *There* , he thought with some satisfaction, *no way can she take that wrong.* He smiled at his team mate.

Hinata was left several paces behind as her legs momentarily froze in place. Her face turned bright red and Naruto wouldn't have been surprised if her hair started to smoke and frizz up. He blinked, then ran back and waved his hand in front of Hinata's eyes, startling her out of her daze. She ducked her head down with a small smile and they turned to follow their team mates…

Only to discover that Kurenai and Shino had turned around as well, and were staring at them.

Naruto shrugged and scratched the back of his head with a sheepish grin. At least he'd made himself understood properly. It was about time.

Hinata managed to get her face back under control by the time Kurenai-sensei led them to their destination. She found it difficult to concentrate after Naruto's blunt, but honest words. She realized he was mirroring her words to him when she reassured him that she still wanted him to stay on Team Eight, Kyuubi and all, but it still shocked her when he said that he'd rather have her on his team than Ino or Sakura. Especially when she considered all the times he'd tried to ask Sakura out when they were in the Academy.

Naruto was *glad* she was his team mate. Her. The Hyuuga reject, who failed everything she ever tried to do… except maybe at being Naruto's friend? She knew she'd helped him, at least a little, that day by the stream – even if she had gone about it all wrong. She supposed she should be grateful to the fates: if she were only going to be allowed to do one thing right, then this would be the one that she would pick.

Hinata's bemused thoughts cut off in surprise when Kurenai led them to Moritake's for their last task of the day. The jonin's face was even more somber than usual as she explained that her jonin sensei always brought his team here after a long mission away from Konoha to discuss the mission, plan what they would work on next, and generally celebrate their success.

Hinata knew from the way their sensei always spoke of them in the past tense that Kurenai-sensei's team was no more. She was nowhere near as skilled at reading people as a proper Hyuuga should be, but she didn't have to be to know that something dreadful must have happened to them. Shino and Naruto seemed to pick up on this as well, because they were silent as Kurenai led them inside, greeted the owner with a nod, and settled them at a table in a darkened corner.

Despite their stated purpose of celebration in coming there, they were all silent as they waited for their orders to arrive. Kurenai seemed extremely distracted by something, and frowned off into the distance. Hinata noticed Naruto fidgeting nervously. If she wasn't used to the frequent formal dinners at the Hyuuga compound, she'd

probably do the same. Finally, Naruto could no longer contain himself and spoke up.

"Sensei?" he asked, "what was your jonin-sensei like?"

Kurenai froze with her sake halfway to her lips and Hinata held her breath. While she was equally curious, she couldn't believe Naruto had just asked their sensei like that.

"Why do you want to know?" Kurenai asked in a far-too-quiet voice. Hinata had only seen Kurenai become really angry once, after speaking to her father. She'd come out of the conversation possessed by a cold fury that was frankly terrifying. She didn't understand what her father had said to provoke such a reaction, but she knew she never wanted to see such rage in her sensei again.

Naruto's voice took on an unusually thoughtful tone as he stared into the distance. For an instant, Hinata pictured his unusually somber expression under the Hokage's traditional hat and felt a shudder of premonition. Was she watching fates change before her eyes?

"He was *your* sensei," was all Naruto said after a moment.

To their surprise Shino spoke up as well. "If he's had anywhere near as large an effect on you, as you have had on your students, then a desire to know more about him is only logical."

"Yeah," Naruto added, nodding, "That almost makes him our sensei as well, doesn't it?"

"I would be honored to hear of him as well," Hinata heard herself adding. She was horrified at the thought of prying into potentially painful memories, but Naruto and Shino's reasons had moved her. And she had to back up her team mates as well.

Kurenai-sensei was quiet for a moment as the waitress brought out their orders. After she left though, the jonin began to talk. "Kobaru-sensei was not the sort of person you would picture as a shinobi. He

was even stockier than Sarutobi Asuma, who works with your class mates on Team Ten, and Kobaru was nearly a head taller; as… a team mate… once said, he looked like a boulder that had grown legs and gone for a walk.. With his size and strength, he was formidable with taijutsu, but he always said "only a fool hunts with one arrow in his quiver", so he made a point of learning…"

Hinata sat, utterly still, as her sensei's voice painted a vivid picture of the man who'd played a major role in making her the kunoichi that sat before them. Their food sat, cooling and forgotten.

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It was after dark before they left Moritake's. It was odd for Naruto, to feel like he'd come to know someone he'd never met, but it was a good sort of odd. He could see where Kurenai-sensei had learned a lot from the man, but added her own spin to his lessons before she passed them on. He wondered what he would teach his genins when he was a jonin. Hopefully by that time everyone would have forgotten about 'Sexy no jutsu'; if they didn't, he was going to have to have a little "talk" with Konohamaru...

Naruto shook his head at that thought. When Kurenai dismissed them, the pensive jonin gave them the next day off to rest and replace any damaged or worn gear. It was well past visiting hours at the hospital, but he'd make time to visit Iruka-sensei tomorrow. Naruto grimaced at the thought of all the laundry he needed to do before he went to sleep. The sooner he resumed working with Gai and Lee, the less pain would be involved in catching up. Tomorrow morning he would seek them out again. Maybe Gai would have some heavier weights he could borrow…

Naruto's musings were interrupted as Shino and his sensei made their goodbyes. He turned toward Hinata, but the slump of her shoulders suggested that she was less than enthusiastic about going home. Naruto frowned as he wondered how accurate his conclusions about her family were. If he wasn't delusional, that might explain why she lingered outside the restaurant instead of immediately going home.

"Er, Hinata?" he asked.

Hinata jumped and looked up from the fingers she was absently pressing together. "Y-yes, Naruto?"

"I'm going to do some extra training tomorrow with Gai-sensei and Lee, if they aren't out on a mission. Would you like to come as well?" he asked.

"A-ano," she said hesitantly as her cheeks reddened slightly, "wouldn't that be rude? To come uninvited?"

"Nah," Naruto said. "I'll just tell Gai that you were so impressed with my progress that you wanted to see his training methods… He'll go crazy, so just nod politely every time he says something about that 'Power of Youth' thing." He shook his head. "And don't look at their teeth when they smile or you'll be rubbing the spots out of your eyes for a while."

Hinata's eyes widened at Naruto's open duplicity. "I-I- I mean, I can't-"

Naruto nodded quickly bouncing on the balls of his feet. "Sure you can. He's actually nice, in his own weird way. And Lee really wants to beat your cousin, who is his 'eternal rival', and practicing with another Jyuuken user can only help him, right?"

Hinata nodded slowly.

"Great!" Naruto said with a smile. "But you better get some sleep. Those two keep some really early hours. Can you meet me in front of Ichiraku's at five thirty?"

Hinata smiled a little this time, and Naruto felt an odd sense of accomplishment. "Hai!" she said, agreeing.

"See you in the morning, Hinata-chan!" he called out as he raced toward his apartment. He needed to get his laundry going, take as

hot a shower as he could stand, and then reacquaint himself with his bed.

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Hinata stared after the boy as he left, wondering what she'd just gotten herself into. If Naruto actually wanted her there, she supposed she could deal with the awkwardness. If Gai and Lee didn't want her around, she doubted they'd be shy about letting her know. No one else was.

She tried not to dwell on where she was going as her feet carried her home. The branch family member on duty acknowledged her return with the barest of nods as she entered the compound.

Hinata was relieved she was able to slip into her father's house without encountering anyone. Once in her room, with the door shut, she let out a shuddering breath and tried to relax. She unpacked her bag, setting out the items that desperately needed cleaning. The uniform she was wearing was definitely in that category as well, so she changed into a bathing robe and, after setting out her laundry, crept into the bathroom for a long soak.

The hot water soothed her muscles, but just being in this house was increasing her mental tension. She wasn't wanted here. She didn't belong here. She was a failure in a clan that didn't tolerate failures. The realization she'd come to on the way back to Konoha burned ever brighter in her mind.

She didn't want to be here.

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Naruto's fingers were still tingling from his shinobi alarm clock when he arrived in front of Ichiraku's. Hinata had evidently arrived a little early, and was watching the old man fuss over his stove as he prepared for another busy day.

He waved goodbye, promising they'd be back for breakfast, and led Hinata to Gai and Lee's favorite training ground.

"Ah, Naruto!" Gai called out as they entered the clearing. "I heard your team had returned to Konoha, flush with victory and the fire of youth! Are you ready for more steps on the path to become a Genius of Hard Work?"

"Er, yeah," Naruto said, rubbing at the back of his neck while Hinata stared at the odd duo. "And I brought someone who works even harder than I do."

"Yosh!" Lee cried out. "My favorite sparring partner and rival of hard work has returned to Konoha!" Naruto wasn't sure if it was possible, but his eyebrows seemed even thicker than he'd remembered.

"Lee! You are so passionate! You are truly my student!" Tears were streaming from the jonin's eyes, making them sparkle unnaturally in the dim morning light.

"Gai-sensei!"

"Lee!"

"Gai-sensei!"

"Lee!"

"Uhm," Naruto said, interrupting the happy duo; he could have sworn that he heard music off in the distance. "This is Hyuuga Hinata," he said, nudging the dubious-looking girl forward.

"Ah!" Gai said, distracted from their cacophonous duet. "You must be the cousin of my student Neji."

"Hai!" Hinata said, bowing quickly. Naruto thought she looked like she wanted to bolt out of the clearing and hide.

"She's heard me brag about your incredible training techniques," Naruto said quickly. "And she wanted to see for herself. I think they are probably superior to the Hyuuga methods, but only Hinata can

judge that for certain." Hinata spun toward Naruto, her mouth hanging open in shock.

The blond shinobi had been a little worried about laying it on too thickly with the green-clad jonin. He shouldn't have wasted the energy.

"Yosh! The fire of youth extends even into the cold Hyuuga clan!" Gai exclaimed happily. "Neji is a genius, but he lacks Lee's fire and enthusiasm! I will be more than happy to fan the fires of her determination to excel!"

Hinata gaped at the jonin as he and Lee broke into another chorus. She turned to Naruto, her expression puzzled.

"That means you are more than welcome to train with us, Hinata-chan," Naruto translated with a grin and a roll of his eyes.

As they set to work, Naruto braced himself for an unpleasant task – getting caught up to Lee again. The spandex-clad genin was even faster than he remembered, and while Naruto wore his weights on the border patrol mission, he couldn't afford to train himself to exhaustion in hostile territory.

At first, all Naruto could see were green blurs as he tried to block a typhoon of kicks and punches. Even when he did successfully block, Naruto had to lock his stance to avoid being blown off his feet. He could feel his sandals skidding backward on the grass.

He grew frustrated enough to anchor his feet to the ground with chakra, only to have Lee go aerial on him, and send him flying with a spinning jump-kick that went over his block.

Naruto tumbled when he hit the ground, finally skidding on his shoulders and back as he tried to get his eyes to focus. Then he pulled his knees up to his chest and did a kip-up. He was a little dizzy, but his feet were steady. "I see you got soft while I was away,"

Naruto said cockily, even as his vision swam slightly. "That should have knocked me out!"

"Yosh!" Lee shouted and came at him again. As Naruto's blood got moving, his aches faded away in the excitement of combat. Lee scored three more solid hits, but Naruto sprang to his feet even faster and returned to the battle.

Finally, he successfully ducked away from one of Lee's palm-heel strikes, and managed to grab the boy's elbow before he could pull back. Lee chopped at Naruto's elbow, but the blonde's other hand grabbed that wrist before it could connect. Naruto forced his hands apart, yanking Lee temporarily off-balance and right into the knee Naruto slammed into his stomach, even as his forehead cracked into Lee's jaw.

Lee staggered back, gasping for breath and rubbing at his jaw. "It's great to have you back, Naruto-san!" he exclaimed happily. He turned to Gai. "Sensei, do you think I can attempt that move again?"

Gai frowned thoughtfully, his eyes wandering over Naruto, and then Hinata. "With me here to supervise, I think it will be safe. Naruto, Hinata, Lee has been working hard to perfect a special finishing move. He would like to work with Naruto for his first attempt, but it is important that no one mention this move with others. It is to be Lee's secret weapon!" His voice rose at the end, and he gave one of those "nice-guy" poses that made his teeth shine with unnatural brightness.

"All right," Naruto said dubiously. Then he shook his head. Gai wouldn't let him be injured, even if this was a 'finishing move' – Kurenai-sensei would *kill* him. For all his quirks, Maito Gai didn't appear to be suicidal.

All the same, Naruto couldn't help but gulp as he dropped into a defensive stance. Lee had his hands clasped together and gasped "First Gate: Open!"

Then he disappeared in a blur of motion.

Naruto's eyes had just begun to track downward when Lee's foot drove upward into his stomach, launching him into the air. He heard Lee shout "Kage Buyo" and suddenly he could see his sparring partner out of the corner of his eye, leaping into the air behind him, in a parallel arc.

Naruto felt something wrapping around his arms. He looked down as he struggled to free himself. It looked like Lee's arm bandages. Then the boy's arms wrapped around his upper arms in a grip of iron. "Omote Renge!" Lee shouted as they began to spin rapidly. As he struggled to break free, a corner of his mind observed that he was *very* lucky to have not eaten breakfast yet.

It was hard to tell with all the spinning, but Naruto thought they had passed the top of their shared trajectory and were now shooting toward the ground at high speed. As he frantically tried to break free, he realized the purpose of this strange attack. With the way Lee gripped him, his head would strike the ground first – with their combined momentum behind it. Truly a deadly technique.

Naruto's appreciation of the technique was, of course, marred by the fact that he was about to become its first victim. He was seriously considering calling on the red chakra when the two of them jarred to a halt.

"That's enough!" Gai shouted as he caught the two of them. With Lee's grip relaxed, Naruto was able to burst out of the bandages. He tried to turn around and immediately fell to the ground, too dizzy to walk.

"Did I do it right?" Lee asked in a worried tone as leaned forward, resting his hands on his knees.

"If you didn't, I don't ever want to see the right version," Naruto groaned as he tried to swallow. Empty or not, his stomach was feeling rather delicate at the moment; that launching kick certainly

hadn't helped either. He saw Hinata, out of the corner of his eye, watching anxiously. He gave her a small wave and she looked down with a sigh of relief.

"Yes, Lee…" Gai said, pausing dramatically. "You have mastered the *Omote Renge* !" he shouted.

"Such a flowery name for a move that plants your opponent like a turnip," Naruto groused as he tried to climb to his feet, sternly addressing his rebellious inner ear; how Lee was able to stand up at all was completely beyond him.

"Yes, Naruto," Gai said as he helped the genin stand up. "It's a very dangerous move, and only to be used in extreme circumstances. Is that understood, Lee?"

Lee nodded, and then pulled out a small notepad and pencil and began writing. "Yes, sensei. Now that I know I can do it, I will only use it in 'extreme circumstances'."

"When I tell your team mates of your success in the first phase of your initial training, they will be so proud!" Gai exclaimed.

"Yosh, Gai-sensei!" Lee agreed.

"Lee!"

"Gai-sensei!"

At this point Naruto's stomach had enough and he vomited on Gai's sandals. "Sorry!" he murmured as he stumbled backwards, still feeling like the world was spinning around him.

"Ah, the aftereffects were more severe than I anticipated!" Gai exclaimed, raising one be-smeared foot and frowning at it. "Make a note of that, Lee."

"Yes, Sensei!" Lee replied with a serious expression, notepad in hand.

Paradoxically, Naruto felt better after puking, which didn't make much sense to him. A light touch on his shoulder made him turn his head. Hinata offered him a clean cloth and a cup of tea from her thermos. Naruto accepted both gratefully, realizing that she seemed to always be prepared for any emergency with her bag – something he would do well to emulate.

"While Naruto-san recovers, would you do us the honor, Hyuuga-sama?" Gai asked politely.

Hinata's face immediately reddened, but after an encouraging smile from Naruto, she nodded.

Watching Hinata spar with Lee was interesting, and soon Naruto's spasming stomach was forgotten. Lee was still pretty fast, but doing the Omote Renge seemed to have taken a lot out of him. Nevertheless, after the first few exchanges with the Hyuuga girl, he started to go all out again.

Naruto noticed Hinata doing many of the things she used against him when they sparred. He supposed his personal taijutsu style had been influenced by Gai and Lee's goken, but it was still illuminating to see his team mate flow around Lee's attack and make delicate-seeming jyuuken strikes that left the boy moving slower and slower.

Finally, she got through his guard and scored a glancing blow to his left shoulder that made the whole arm freeze up. Lee jumped back with a frown, rubbing at the joint. "Ah! Just like with Neji," he groaned.

"Lee! Do not let yourself become discouraged!" Gai said in a serious voice. "Naruto-san, you regularly spar with Hinata, do you not?"

"Hai!" Naruto agreed with a nod, ignoring the way Hinata's fingers were pushing together again.

"How do you defend against her Jyuuken strikes?" he asked.

"Well," Naruto said slowly, trying to ignore the way Lee had his notepad out again, hanging on his every word. "I usually can't block them directly without getting zapped, and slowing down until she has me at her mercy." He said the last bit with a straight face, but grinned at her blush. "I have to dodge more and block less. In fact, unless I am close enough to block her upper arms, I don't block at all. Otherwise, she pushes chakra into my arm muscles or one of my tenketsu points and that hurts." He shrugged. "I have to come in at odd angles a lot more. And I have to be ready to re-open any tenketsu that get closed."

"Re-open?" Gai asked sharply.

Naruto nodded. "Yes, if I push a hunk of chakra towards that point on my body, it usually pops back open." He shrugged. "Hurts like hell, though; like that pins-and-needles feeling, only about a hundred times worse."

"I see…" Gai said dubiously.

Lee's eyes had gone wide however. "Sensei! Can I learn to do this?"

Naruto shrugged. "Hinata helped me figure out how," he said.

Now the jonin and both genin were staring at the Hyuuga girl, causing her cheeks to glow a bright red. "A-ano," she said hesitantly, "Naruto did most of it out himself. I just told him when it seemed to be working."

Still, Lee's enthusiasm would not be deterred. After fifteen minutes of effort though, Lee's shoulder was just barely able to flex. According to Hinata, his chakra couldn't push quite hard enough to re-open the tenketsu point she had closed. Lee looked downcast as he told them that the reason he concentrated so much on taijutsu was because his chakra coils were severely underdeveloped.

Hinata looked mortified that her technique had forced the proud young genin to admit to his weakness, and Naruto didn't miss the

way her hands bunched into fists holding the hem of her jacket.

"Hey," he said quickly, causing Lee to look up, "at least you didn't fail the genin exam three times like I did." He smiled ruefully. "If Mizuki hadn't been a traitor, I might still be at the Academy."

Of course, after saying something like that, he had to explain the whole mess that ended with him wearing Iruka-sensei's hitai-ite. Naruto hadn't had much experience telling stories before, but with this audience it was easy. Both Hinata and Lee seemed to hang on his words, and even Gai-sensei listened quietly, nodding thoughtfully.

It wasn't until halfway through the tale that he hesitated, wondering how he should handle Mizuki taunting him about the kyuubi. Gai, of course, already knew, as did Hinata. Only Lee was ignorant, but Naruto knew Lee would follow Gai's lead. He'd been right to trust Hinata and Shino, maybe telling Lee would turn out as well…

"So Mizuki started taunting me about the village's secret law, which made Iruka-sensei really mad. He continued, though, telling me about how when the Nine-Tailed Fox attacked Konoha, the Yondaime wasn't really able to kill him – no one could. Instead, the Hokage sealed the demon up inside a new-born baby, namely me. Well, suddenly things started making a lot more sense – like how all the adults hated me, because I was holding the demon that killed their loved ones, including Iruka-sensei's parents. I was so shocked I could barely move when Mizuki hurled this huge fuuma shuriken at me. Next thing I knew, I was on my back, and Iruka was crouched over me, with that big shuriken stuck out of his back."

Naruto paused to catch his breath and check his audience. Lee's unnaturally round eyes were practically bulging from the sockets, and Hinata looked to be on the verge of tears. Gai nodded grimly, though his eyes were bright as well.

"Iruka told me that he didn't blame me at all, and that he could tell *I* wasn't a demon. He said we were both alike, in that we grew up very

lonely…" Naruto's voice trailed off, as he hadn't originally intended to go into that part.

"Anyway," he continued after a deep breath. "Mizuki came after us again, only this time I was more mad than anything else. So I tried the new technique I'd learned from the forbidden scroll, Kage Bunshin no Jutsu." He grinned. "Iruka looked like he was going to have a heart attack, but Mizuki just started screaming as all my clones jumped on him and beat him down. Then Iruka-sensei stood up and told me to close my eyes. When I opened them, he'd tied his hitai-ite onto my head and told me that I'd passed."

"YOSH!" Lee roared, making Naruto and Hinata both jump. "Naruto-san," he continued in a slightly quieter voice, "you are such an inspiration! Surely you are an incarnation of the Power of Youth!"

Naruto wasn't so sure about that, since it sounded a little painful. But at least Lee wasn't making his ears ring anymore, so that was something.

"Lee is correct, Naruto," Gai added in a more reflective tone as he nodded at the blond genin. "That was no doubt a very difficult tale to share. Thank you for using it to inspire Lee."

"If Naruto can overcome such obstacles," Lee declared, his eyes seeming to catch fire, "then a lack of chakra is *nothing* . I *will* find a way to defeat Neji, even without chakra!"

"You ever catch him with that turnip-planting move, you'll kick his ass," Naruto agreed, his stomach rolling slightly at the memory.

"Lee has indeed worked very hard to perfect that move," Gai agreed. "Tonight, we will celebrate his success!" he declared. "You two are both invited, as well."

Hinata's eyes widened, but Naruto answered for both of them. "We'll be there," he said.

"Good, good," Gai said punching the palm of his hand. "Hinata-san, you are welcome to join us any morning you wish. Any assistance you can give Lee, will be most welcome. However, I would ask that you not mention any of this to your cousin, Neji. He is highly skilled, but I think it would be good for his training if he were to receive some 'youthful surprises' when he spars. It will demonstrate how he should never underestimate his opponents. Is this acceptable to you?" he asked politely.

Hinata nodded, eyes wide.

At this point, Naruto and Lee were both recovered, but Gai had Naruto and Hinata spar while he and Lee took copious notes. Hinata seemed a little self-conscious at first, but they soon settled into a quick rhythm of attack and counter-attack.

Naruto slipped first, and felt a spike of chakra blast through his elbow, locking the joint as capillaries ruptured and the muscles cramped painfully. But he was able to grab Hinata's forearm with his good hand before she could pull back. Naruto rolled backward, planting his feet in Hinata's stomach like he'd done before and launching her into the air. His working hand flashed toward his kunai pouch and he sent a trio of blunted shuriken toward his team mate. Hinata's kunai appeared in her hand like magic and she deflected the two shuriken that would have hit her. She tucked her legs up to speed her rotation so she would land feet down.

But no sooner did her feet touch the earth than Naruto was right on top of her, a flash of yellow on his palm as his hand brushed the sleeve of her jacket. "Raiton: Shokkingu Haji!" he said as the jutsu discharged.

Hinata flinched violently at the shock, but Naruto had summoned just enough electricity for her to feel it, but not enough to hurt.

Naruto stepped back, proud of scoring a hit, as well as the proof of his hard-earned chakra-control. Then he saw Hinata's head and the grin froze on his face. The electrical discharge left Hinata's hair

standing on end, forming an indigo cloud around her head. It was pretty funny, but Naruto refused to laugh at her expense as he massaged his bruised elbow.

As the kunoichi settled back into a ready stance, Naruto hesitated. He knew Hinata was easily embarrassed, and the condition of her hair would probably mortify her, as funny as it might be. He was tempted to just not say anything, but Gai and Lee were watching. Finally, it came down to the fact that she was his team mate. If he let it go without saying anything, he was turning his back on that.

"Hey Hinata?" he asked.

Hinata frowned. But she didn't make a connection between her hair and the vague gestures Naruto was making over the top of his own head. Finally, he just gave up and stepped forward, rapidly patting down her static-raised hair. Unfortunately, individual strands wanted to cling to his fingers, so he had to stroke the dark blue hair a couple of times before it would lie flat.

He'd been hoping to save the kunoichi some embarrassment, but her face was bright red when he stepped back. "Er, your hair, it was sticking up from the jutsu," he explained.

"Oh," was all Hinata said. Then she dropped into a Jyuuken stance and came at him again.

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By the time they left Gai and Lee, Hinata was as tired and hungry as her team mate professed to be. Even *her* stomach growled once as they walked back toward town, making Naruto crack up as she looked horrified.

"Neh, Hinata," he reassured her, "you're hungry because you've been working hard all morning. No one's going to think you're rude because you want to improve!"

Hinata tried to draw encouragement from Naruto's words, but she could still feel scourged by her father's contempt for crude behavior. Her face was downcast as she tried to banish his hateful words. "Ano," she asked after a moment, "where are we going?"

"This is the other half of my morning routine," he explained. "Gai and Lee train too early for me to eat breakfast first, and they work me hard, so I always have a healthy appetite… and here we are!" He gestured grandly and Hinata realized that they were standing in front of Ichiraku's. "I get something to eat before I meet with Team Eight! Go to make sure I don't pass out when we're looking for that damn cat again!" Naruto said enthusiastically. He quickly looked left and right and then leaned forward. "It's not quite as good as yours, of course," he whispered confidentially, "but nice and quick."

Hinata found herself blushing again. It was nice how Naruto, and even Shino, always complimented her on cooking, especially when she wasn't that good. She'd prepared a few meals for her family on special occasions and none of them had remarked on their quality. Still, it was nice that her team mates tried so hard to make her feel better, so she obliged him by smiling a little.

A couple of villagers got up from the counter at that moment, and Naruto grabbed her hand and hauled her forward before someone else claimed the vacated stools. Hinata thought her knees were going to collapse when his fingers closed around hers, but she managed not to squeak. She knew her team mate was just concerned about filling his stomach, not that she wasn't hungry as well, but it was pleasant, for a moment, to pretend that he was holding her hand for other reasons. Futile, but pleasant.

"Oi! Old man! You have no idea how much I missed this place!" Naruto called out as he plopped down on one of the stools. Hinata was a bit quieter as she sat down as well, a little disappointed when Naruto let go of her hand.

"Hello Naruto!" the old man called out happily, "it's been far too quiet these last few weeks. Hey Ayame! Look who's back!"

The cook's daughter looked up from the vegetables she was chopping. She smiled and waved at Naruto, and to Hinata's surprise the young woman winked at her when Naruto had turned back to her father.

"So what's the special today?" Naruto asked eagerly.

"Himono with rice, miso soup, and pickled daikon," the old man replied with a smile.

"That sounds perfect," Naruto said as he pulled out his bulging gama-chan wallet. Before they went to Moritake's sensei had stopped at the bank and cashed in all three Bingo Book vouchers, splitting the money between the four of them. Hinata wanted to refuse at first, but after distracting Naruto for a moment, Kurenai-sensei had whispered to her that sharing the reward was one way for Naruto to lessen his anguish at being forced to take two lives. She didn't think he'd be able to enjoy any of the reward unless it was shared with his friends. That had effectively stifled any of Hinata's objections – she'd do anything to make him feel better.

That said, she still didn't want him spending his money on her now. "Ano, Naruto," she said quickly, "I can pay for my own," she objected.

"That's okay," he said with a grin. "You can pay for tomorrow's."

Hinata opened her mouth and then closed it again. The strange jonin and his student had invited her to train with them any time she wanted, but she was sure he was just being polite. Or perhaps he was just being courteous to Naruto, who they both seemed to respect. She was happy to see others who appreciated her friend's positive qualities, but she didn't want to presume upon that either.

On the other hand, they did seem interested in studying her Jyuuken techniques. Lee's commitment to defeating her cousin was laudable, and reminded her of Naruto's unflagging determination. While she was nowhere near Neji's level, perhaps she could help in some small

way. But did that make her disloyal to her family? Gai said it would be good for Neji to be surprised occasionally, as it would make him less likely to underestimate a real opponent.

At first she'd been a little dismayed to see how easily Naruto revealed his secret to Lee, in comparison to the difficulties he had telling her. In truth, he hadn't told her so much as give a few hints and then confirm her guesses. It… hurt… to think that he could be so much more open with Lee. But then she noticed how he was smiling at her when he paused for breath in the middle, like they were sharing some secret joke. It made her very warm inside, this inclusive feeling. It was then that she realized that it was her and Shino's acceptance of him that made it easier to him to tell Lee. That alone had made the whole morning worthwhile.

Lost in thought, Hinata was slow to notice as Naruto's face fell, but his words captured her attention. "Don't worry about it, Hinata," he said in a falsely cheery voice that she was only lately able to detect, "I know I keep some ridiculously long hours with all this training, so…"

Hinata shook her head. "I would be honored to train with the three of you, but will I not be more of a bother?" Whether she attended or not, she wasn't about to let Naruto think it had anything to do with him. She almost cringed when she realized he was hiding his true feelings again. That would not do at all.

Naruto shook his head firmly. "Did you see all those notes Lee took? When they were assigned to Gai, he and Neji were put on the same team because Neji had the highest scores in the Academy, while Lee barely passed. He doesn't talk about it, but I think your cousin said some things that first day that really ticked Lee off. He's been dying to find some way of defeating his 'eternal rival', and Gai wants all his hard work to pay off in the end."

Hinata's eyes went wide at that explanation. Naruto didn't show it often, but she was occasionally surprised by how much he picked up on. Of course, training with someone three or four hours every day

would doubtlessly give you a lot of insight into their character, but still… "I see," was all she could say to that. "I don't think it would be disloyal to my family to assist in training my cousin's team mate."

The grin that split Naruto's face was genuine this time, much to Hinata's relief. The fake one made her feel slightly ill, wondering how long he had worn it to make the disguise so seamless. "You're the greatest, Hinata-chan!" he beamed.

Hinata ducked her head down instinctively, even as her cheeks reddened again. Fortunately, her embarrassing moment was cut short as the kindly older man set a pair of plates down before them.

"Itadakimasu!" they both said, Naruto in a far louder voice, and then they fell on their food like a pair of starving wolves. Hinata, as a Hyuuga, of course maintained perfect table manners at all times – but her chopsticks moved rather quickly nonetheless.

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Aburame Shino awoke and performed his morning ablutions with the same precision he always followed when at home. He moved through the house like a soundless wraith, and was soon tending a rather promising-looking colony of winged kikai bugs. Their ability to fly at an extremely high rate of speed gave them exceptional maneuverability, but they performed somewhat erratically under stress. It was thought that the enhanced speed with which they moved made that inevitable, but he and his father were testing that hypothesis by crossing them with more phlegmatic ground-borne strains. Only three of the resulting sub-strains retained their wings, and only this one showed any signs of improved responsiveness or obedience.

Despite his concentration, Shino was fully aware of the opening and closing of the door behind him.

"Is there something you'd like to discuss?" his father asked in a low voice as he looked over his shoulder at the armature-mounted

magnifying glass Shino was using to observe the queen's egg production.

"Perhaps," Shino allowed. He'd said barely three words since arriving home late the previous night. He was highly annoyed regarding some issues, but that was not sufficient reason for him to behave in an overly emotional manner. Shouting at his parents and the clan elders would be highly counterproductive, even if it would entail a certain, visceral, satisfaction. "I know the secret behind the Hokage's law regarding Uzumaki Naruto," he finally said.

"I see," his father said with a quiet sigh. "I suppose I should see the Hokage about getting you assigned to another team?"

Shino turned toward his father. "Why would I desire such an irrational action to be taken on my behalf?" he asked in a clipped monotone.

Aburame Shibi opened his mouth, but then closed it without speaking. After a moment he began again. "I assumed that your anger was related to the secret being revealed. As this is apparently not the case, I will await your interpretation of the situation."

Shino adjusted his sunglasses. "My dissatisfaction with the situation stems from the attitude of the elders toward my team mate, a shinobi who had borne a large burden, practically since birth, with a dignity and aplomb that leaves me embarrassingly humbled," he said in a tight voice. "Despite this, the elders of our clan openly disparaged him throughout his childhood. This attitude, promulgated through the elder generation, infected the thinking of myself and others of our cohort, to the extent that their distaste for Uzumaki Naruto was communicated, in full, to practically everyone he came into contact with. I now find myself questioning the judgment, rationality, and fitness to lead of the elders, as well as the rest of their generation. I find myself questioning the Aburame clan's commitment to logic, and whether I still have a place within it."

Shibi's eyebrows were completely visible above his sunglasses. Shino's statement was the equivalent, in Aburame terms, of shouting himself hoarse and setting all their houses on fire. "I… see," he said slowly. "I admit I have had little to no contact with the boy; most of my opinions were likewise formed listening to reports from our representative to the village council. I believe he is known as a chronic prankster, and many have petitioned the Hokage to have him removed from the Academy or censured in other ways."

"Naruto's… eccentricities…" Shino said, choosing his words with care, "are somewhat understandable when viewed in light of his almost total social isolation. It is also a matter of public record that since he began working with Kurenai-sensei and Team Eight, Naruto has yet to pull a prank on any of the villagers."

Aburame Shibi stared at his son for a long moment. "What do you intend to do at this point?" he finally asked.

"I would speak with the Aburame elders regarding Naruto," Shino answered. "Loyalty to my team mate and a fellow shinobi of The Leaf demands no less."

"And if they refuse to ameliorate their attitudes?" Shibi asked.

"I believe one of Uzumaki's sayings comes to mind," Shino replied. "We'll burn that bridge when we get to it."

A/N:

Many thanks to my betas, Runsamok and Bibliophile20!

*A personal note to a thankfully small portion of my readers:*

*Positive, thoughtful reviews encourage me to continue the story and work on the next update. Obscene, threatening, and insulting messages, emails and reviews from readers angry at me because I don't update faster have the opposite effect.*

*When you are paying my salary, you have the right to impose deadlines… and not until then.*

Please address any general questions or concerns to my yahoo group, Viridian Dreams. The link is in my Author Profile.

-Matthew

# Complex Confrontations

Chapter Ten

As a rule, Naruto tried to avoid the Konoha General Hospital. He'd been there several times when he was younger, usually in conjunction with one of the many 'accidents' he seemed to be involved in at the orphanage. The sharp, astringent smell of the disinfectants brought back painful memories, as did the cold eyes of the nurses and doctors.

Let's not even get started on the needles.

In any event, he was more than happy to let Hinata do the talking for both of them. The receptionist's voice was pleasant in tone, albeit somewhat formal, when she told Hinata Iruka-sensei's room number. She still shot Naruto a rather venomous glance, but broke it off when Hinata thanked her in a clipped voice.

Naruto immediately wondered if Hinata had issues with hospitals as well. Glancing over at his team mate, he saw the faint crease on her forehead. If he didn't know better, he might have thought she was angry or something. As they headed down the hallway, her features smoothed and she glanced over at him. Naruto quickly looked away, but not before she jumped a little as well.

"Sorry, Hinata," he said quickly. "I guess visiting a hospital isn't much fun on your day off, is it?"

"Ano, Naruto-kun," she replied, "I would like to see Iruka-sensei as well."

"Ah, okay then," Naruto said, confused, as they continued down the corridor.

When they found room 205, Naruto started to pull it open, but stopped when Hinata shook her head. He shrugged and knocked on

the door. "Iruka-sensei, are you decent?" he called out. He didn't think he'd been that loud, but Hinata cringed nonetheless.

There was a low cough. "Come in, Naruto!"

Naruto grinned at the sound of the chuunin's voice and opened the door.

Umino Iruka lay on a hospital bed, both of his lower legs wrapped in bulky casts. His ribcage was swathed in bandages as well, that extended below the line of the blanket draped across his lap. His left wrist was also in a cast, but his right arm appeared undamaged. He used this to wave the genin into the room. "I was hoping I'd see you again when you got back!" he said in a cheerful voice.

Naruto's stomach dropped as he took in the extent of his important person's injuries. He remembered Konohamaru shouting that Iruka was dead. For an instant, he recalled the feeling of his fist punching through Kazuyo's chest and shuddered a little.

Iruka shook his head at his former pupil. "It's not as bad as it looks," he said quickly, "I have a few broken bones, but they're all healing rapidly. I should be out of here within a week or so."

"He's right," another voice added. One that made both Naruto and Hinata stand straighter. Sitting in a chair next to the bed, partially obscured by a curtain, was their sensei, Yuuhi Kurenai. She stood up quickly and nodded to her students. "I was just leaving," she added, then turned back toward Iruka. "We can continue this conversation after you've been discharged."

Iruka nodded, smiling faintly. As the door closed behind his sensei, Naruto turned toward Iruka with raised eyebrows. Then he gave the man a roguish smile. "Way to go, Iruka-sensei!"

Iruka's face turned red and he sputtered as Hinata looked away. But not before Naruto noticed a small grin on her lips.

"I swear, if I wasn't confined to this bed…" Iruka snarled. Then he grinned. "Konoha has been far too quiet without you around, Naruto!"

Naruto laughed and looked down, scratching at the back of his head. He could have sworn that he heard a little chuckle from Hinata as well.

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Kurenai smiled to herself as she made her way out of the hospital. Her grin grew positively evil as she saw a squad of ANBU half-carrying, half-dragging an older, bespectacled man out of a comfortable-looking office. His muffled protests carried down the corridor, causing the hospital personnel to stare. Sarutobi was proving to be as good as his word; she'd only dropped off her report a couple of hours ago, before coming to speak with Umino Iruka.

Unfortunately, Iruka hadn't had much time to investigate the suspicions she'd shared with him. Even before the kidnapping, he'd been tapped to help with the preparations for the upcoming Chuunin Exam. All the same, he'd managed to do a little digging while he was re-organizing the testing records.

An ANBU squad had been assigned to keep an eye on Naruto after he left the orphanage. Far too many 'accidents' were happening near the boy for it to be coincidence. The second time he'd been 'accidentally' run over by a produce cart, he was severely injured and was in a coma for the better part of a week. Given what she knew of Naruto's recovery rate, Kurenai knew a normal little boy would likely have died from those injuries. Fear of the Hokage's wrath was likely the only reason there were no 'unfortunate accidents' in the hospital itself.

Naruto's injuries, along with the loud complaints he heard about how often 'the demon' had come to them with new wounds, led the Sandaime to assign guardians to keep an eye on the boy. Their reports were kept in a separate file, but it was one Iruka was allowed to see. He'd recorded the dates of various 'incidents' through the

years, somewhat dismayed at how often someone had tried to hurt the boy. Naruto hadn't said a thing, but it was too much to hope that he hadn't noticed the ones that were foiled ahead of time.

Kurenai shook her head as she wondered, not for the last time, how her student still managed to be as… human, as he still was. In his place, she didn't think she would have been able to ignore so much hatred.

Iruka's notes did, however, reveal something interesting. There seemed to be a pattern to the incidents. They almost always happened within the first week of each month. This observation remained a statistical curiosity until Kurenai remembered that the village council always met on the last day of each month. If the bank manager could be believed, it was likely that some faction was using those meetings to plan things, or even just fanning the flames of resentment and then hoping others would take action. That would account for the timing of the attacks.

Umino Iruka was an optimistic man, one who tried to assume the best about people. That helped explain why he was able to give Naruto the benefit of the doubt when few else would, something for which Kurenai was very grateful to the man. At the same time, he was also resistant to the idea that members of the village council were actively working to subvert the Hokage's will, and bring harm to an innocent child. But while the timing of the attacks was not direct proof of a conspiracy, he could not come up with a more innocent explanation.

In the end, he agreed that he would continue seeking proof after he was released from the hospital. Kurenai thanked him sincerely for his efforts – any allies she could gather in this cause were precious indeed – bringing a pleased blush to his face. She was gratified to note that the man was willing to ignore his better nature where a threat to Naruto was concerned. She also didn't miss the happy smile that spread across the scarred chuunin's face at the sound of the genin's voice when her students arrived.

On the other hand, his injuries and workload made him of limited use for what she needed to do. She thought about Morino Ibiki, the interrogation specialist she'd come to know in the weeks of questioning after her team mates were killed. The special jonin had a sufficiently suspicious frame of mind – the timing of the attacks would speak volumes to him. On the other hand, she couldn't be sure of his loyalties regarding Naruto. He was utterly loyal to the Hokage, but might he be one who sought to protect the old man from his own softer nature? She didn't think it likely, but the consequences if she were wrong would be too severe.

If the danger were only to herself, she might have risked it. She'd done so before when she shared her suspicions regarding Mattai. Ibiki-san had given her good advice, words she had taken to heart. "If you are right," he said gravely, "then this goes far too deep for an easy resolution. You are a small target, girl, and one that won't be missed for very long if you start to worry the wrong parties. Gather your information as best you can, without revealing your purpose or what you know. Then present it all at once, holding nothing back. That way, they have nothing to gain by killing you."

As wise as his words may have been, she couldn't trust Naruto's safety to an unknown factor. Morino Ibiki had a well-deserved reputation for ruthlessness, especially after the botched mission where he'd acquired those horrific scars. Kurenai didn't know all the details, but she did acknowledge that Ibiki would do what he felt needed to be done, disregarding all else. If he thought Konoha's safety was best guaranteed by murdering an innocent, she didn't think he'd hesitate.

It was an uncomfortable realization for Yuuhi Kurenai, this acknowledgement that she could consciously place the welfare of her genin before that of her village. She supposed that the injustices inflicted by the villagers on *her* team made this almost inevitable, and Naruto was only the most obvious example. Hinata displayed the signs of chronic emotional abuse, most likely inflicted by her bastard of a father. Shino appeared to be well-treated by his clan, but, like

most Aburames, he was rather isolated from his classmates who didn't understand or were frankly disgusted by his family's distinctive jutsus. Never mind how often the kikai bugs had proven invaluable in missions or open warfare, the Aburame were *actively* encouraged to keep to themselves.

Maybe that was why she'd taken Kobaru-sensei's lessons on teamwork and emphasized them even more. Perhaps if they trusted each other enough, when one of their personal situations boiled over they would be able to help each other. Kurenai knew she'd do what she could, but an effective sensei works to make their own presence unnecessary. Some day, when she was gone, perhaps these three would still be able to rely on one another…

Kurenai shook her head, amused at her suddenly morbid train of thought. She would approach this situation like any other mission. She would gather her information, biding her time until it was time to act. And she would groom Naruto to become the village council's worst nightmare – a Hokage.

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Naruto and Hinata visited with Iruka-sensei for over two hours before the nurses asked them (with a polite nod toward Hinata and a scowl for him) to let Iruka rest.

Of course, Naruto had told Iruka everything about their mission and the ambush. Hinata wasn't sure if this was allowed or not, but Iruka was a chuunin, and they hadn't been expressly forbidden from speaking, so she remained silent while Naruto entertained his captive audience.

She worried that Iruka would be angry that she led Team 8 into such a dangerous situation, but his eyes were understanding when she finally gathered the courage to stop staring at the floor. A short while later, when Naruto revealed that she knew of his prisoner, the honestly grateful look Iruka gave her spoke volumes. She couldn't remember ever receiving such a look of fervent approval before, and

began to realize just how much Iruka worried about his most troublesome student.

She'd give anything to have her father look at her like that. Just once.

That realization soured her enjoyment of the visit, though she didn't let it show. Naruto was so happy to see Iruka in good spirits that she couldn't let herself do anything to spoil it.

Still, she was quiet as they left the hospital. After a minute, Naruto asked her if she wanted to go spar, as this was their normal team training time. Hinata nodded, but they had taken no more than three steps before Neji appeared out of the crowd, standing in front of her.

"Hinata," he said, not even acknowledging Naruto's presence. "You are to report to Hiashi-sama immediately."

"Hai," she agreed quickly, looking down. She didn't raise her eyes until her cousin's angry presence had departed. When she did, she was surprised to see Naruto frowning.

"I have to go," she said.

Naruto nodded. "Do you think you will be done in time to meet Lee and Gai?" he asked quietly.

"I don't know," she said, biting her lower lip. "Father probably wants to discuss my performance on the mission."

Naruto scowled fiercely, which surprised her. "If he gives you any crap," Naruto whispered, "remember what sensei and the Hokage both said."

She said her goodbyes somewhat mechanically, promising to meet early next morning, wondering what Naruto meant by that. He seemed to think her father would find fault in her conduct, which was

depressing but probably accurate. But at the same time, he was telling her to recall the words of others.

*Yuuhi Kurenai is not one to lightly praise another's logic,* the Hokage had said. The Hokage said that he agreed with Kurenai-sensei – she had done well. If father disagreed with that, did it make him wrong? Or did he just understand her better? Perhaps they did not hold her to the Hyuuga standard, which her father did. But if the head of the clan disagreed with the Hokage of the village, who was right?

These unsettling thoughts accompanied her all the way back to the Hyuuga compound.

The branch family servants directed her to the audience chamber, where she found her father sitting stiffly in his usual formal white robes. With scarcely a nod of greeting, the questions began. Off balance, Hinata began answering them as best she could, trying not to let a stammer creep into her voice.

Her father seemed unusually interested in their last mission, more than he'd ever been before. She answered as truthfully as she could, trying not to stammer when he scowled or frowned thoughtfully. The Iwakagure shinobi mistaking Naruto for the Fourth Hokage provoked a fierce scowl, accompanied by a visible clenching of the muscles along his jaw.

It wasn't until she described fighting Hanabi's kidnappers that his questions became slower and more… cautious. She puzzled over this as she groped for the answers. Her father wanted something from her, but didn't want to tell her what it was. It wasn't until he asked if Naruto had displayed any special abilities that the pieces all fit together.

"Not that I saw, Father," she replied without missing a beat. While it was literally true, since he didn't use the red chakra until after she was knocked unconscious, Hinata was still shocked at how easily the words left her lips. She next described waking up with Naruto cleaning off her face and Hanabi standing over her as she wondered

why she had, well, not *lied,* but she had certainly not told the entire truth.

*Father suspects something happened,* she realized after he had fallen silent. *Why does he care, unless he wants to use this information somehow?* She remembered his reaction to her first mention of her team mate's name. *I think he wants to use it against Naruto somehow. Maybe he hates Naruto - like how the Hokage was worried Shino and I would if we found out the truth... He wants to hurt Naruto-kun!*

With that the smoldering anger returned again, the frustration of failure and anger at her helplessness… but still she maintained her façade of apathy. It was this mask of ice she'd learned to don over the years around her family. It wasn't perfect, but sometimes it made it hurt less when she spoke to her father. This time, for Naruto's sake, she held it almost perfectly.

"Do you have any idea how Uzumaki was able to defeat his opponents?" her father finally asked.

Hinata tried to look thoughtful. "He trains very hard, in addition to what Kurenai-sensei does with our team. I-I am working extra as well, in order to keep up, so I don't become a burden on my team mates," she answered. It was a half-truth – Naruto's improved taijutsu had definitely played a role in his victory, and she could see how his training with Gai-sensei had helped. She included that last part as an echo of her father's admonishments to not drag down her team and embarrass the clan.

She felt vaguely uneasy about deceiving her father, but found to her surprise that she could do it for Naruto if she had to. The burn of shame in the pit of her stomach was drowned in her concern for her team mate. Had her father seen through her mask? Was he even now concluding that she knew more than she was telling? She knew he would find any deception on her part inexcusable…

Of course she was nervous under her father's gaze, despite her efforts to mask her emotions. That made this interview no different than scores of previous ones, where she'd hoped against hope for his approval. And so Hyuuga Hiashi came to the only logical conclusion – his daughter hadn't seen anything of use.

"Next time you return from an extended mission, you will report directly to me," he said severely. "Return to your quarters and do not leave them for the evening meal. You are dismissed."

Hinata bowed and rose to her feet as gracefully as she could manage with her stomach fluttering like a sparrow in a net. She left the audience chamber on silent feet, retreating to her quarters as quickly as decorum would allow.

As victories go, it wasn't much. But it was a first. Being confined to her quarters was a small price to pay, especially since she had a packed bento in her bag. Her only regret was missing the celebration for Lee.

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As he surveyed the ruins of the restaurant, Naruto was glad Hinata hadn't been there. Things had started off badly and had deteriorated rapidly.

To start off, Hyuuga Neji was there, apparently at the insistence of Gai. The white-eyed genin was coolly formal with his sensei and Tenten, ignored Lee, and looked at Naruto like something to be scraped from his sandal. Recalling the way he'd acted toward Hinata, Naruto had to actively restrain his temper.

But at least he wasn't the cause of the disaster.

Gai had led them in a series of toasts to Lee's success, which had led to much amusement for the other genin. Tenten just smiled at the antics of her sensei and his protégé, but Neji was noticeably less subtle. Naruto saw Lee's eyes narrow, but that might have been the end of it.

If it wasn't for the sake.

Gai was drinking the traditional beverage for such an occasion, but he insisted that the underage genin drink non-alcoholic potables. Naruto didn't have a problem with that – he didn't want to become drunk, and he knew an alcoholic couldn't become Hokage. He settled for water, since he was still slightly dehydrated from his afternoon training, Tenten had some fruit juice, and Neji drank coffee in the western style, a concoction that seemed to suit his bitter disposition.

Lee, however, had opted for a clear but spicy fermented ginger beer – it didn't contain alcohol, but it came in ceramic bottles that resembled Gai's sake containers. Naruto wasn't sure that Lee's mimicry of his sensei was entirely healthy, but he had no idea how much of a premonition those concerns would prove to be.

At some point in the toasts, Gai and Lee had evidently switched bottles. After the last "Kampai!" Gai frowned and looked down at the bottle he'd poured his drink from. Lee's face, on the other hand, turned bright red and his normally wide round eyes were half-lidded. Naruto stared at his friend while Neji let out a quiet snort of amusement.

"Bashtard!" Lee slurred as he dove across the table at his team mate and rival. But *what* he'd done wasn't half as surprising as *how* he'd done it. Naruto was used to the boy's blinding speed, but what he saw now was comparable to what he'd been like after that 'first gate' thing.

Neji, the Hyuuga *genius* , was caught flatfooted by a right hook and sent tumbling to the floor. Tenten let out a squeak and shot backwards out of her chair, right before the table edge went through the space her lap had occupied a moment earlier.

Gai was only caught flatfooted for a moment before his hands shot forward to grab his student, but Lee twisted like an eel and was

suddenly free, leaping from their table to an adjoining one before launching himself at Neji again.

The Hyuuga genin blocked three quick punches from the green-clad boy, and countered with a Jyuuken strike at Lee's chest that was sure to incapacitate him… Except Lee bent backward almost ninety degrees at the waist, letting the strike pass harmlessly overhead. Then he calmly placed both palms on the ground behind him and, digging his fingertips into the hard wooden floor, shot up into a perfect handstand.

Of course, in doing this, his feet, complete with weights, whipped upward, catching Neji in the stomach and sending him flying backward. The Hyuuga bounced off another table, smearing his tunic with hoison sauce and sending fragments of the meat dish flying amongst the diners. He finally sailed through a window – accompanied by a cloud of shattered glass.

"Lee! You must stop this!" Gai shouted, grabbing at the genin… but Lee just disappeared and reappeared next to Tenten. "Doan worry," he slurred to the kunoichi as she jumped back in surprise. "Yer nishe. Doan wanna hit joo. Doan see why ya like dat cold fish doh. He's not as nish as his coushin." Just as Gai's hands were reaching for Lee's shoulders, Lee fell back into a somersault, rolling between Gai's feet as smoothly as if they'd practiced that move.

"You wanna spar, shenshei?" Lee asked, hiccupping. Then his head turned and he saw Naruto. Lee peered at him owlishly as Gai pleaded with him to calm down and wait for the alcohol to wear off.

"Joo tink Hinata ish nisher than her coushin?" Lee asked.

Naruto nodded warily, testing his footing on the sticky floor. As Lee's daily sparring partner, he was amazed he'd been spared so far.

"I tink she is nish. I tink she likesh you too," Lee announced with a crooked smile. He rubbed at his eyes as he let out a laugh. "That's

funny becuz she sho quiet, and you sho loud. But joo quiet too. Never shay anyting about shtuff, even dat ting inshide joo, dat –"

He never completed his words because Naruto launched himself forward closing Lee's mouth with his fist. Fortunately, the drunk genin seemed was distracted by his own monologue, or Naruto doubted he would have even connected. The impact sent Lee tumbling into another table that had already been abandoned by fearful diners. Before the last plate had hit the ground, Lee was being held down by half a dozen clones. The taijutsu specialist arched his back and kicked, sending the clones flying upward to explode against the ceiling.

But the distraction was long enough for Gai to get in close and tap two extended fingers against a spot on the back of Lee's neck. The green-clad genin stumbled forward a step, rolled his eyes up in his head, and collapsed bonelessly to the floor.

Lee was still out cold when the ANBU patrol showed up. Naruto supposed he shouldn't be surprised that the restaurant owner tried to blame him for the chaos, but it still rankled. Privately, he was just glad this wasn't *Moritake's* , otherwise Kurenai would never forgive him. Gai, however, accepted all the blame for the situation, and promised to pay the damages… which made Naruto profoundly grateful to the man.

In fact, the jonin just nodded distractedly while the restaurant manager ranted on about damaged furniture and lost business. His eyes were fixed on Lee, who dozed fitfully as he lay across a trio of chairs that Naruto had dragged together.

Tenten had re-entered the trashed dining room with a wobbly Neji a short while earlier. The Hyuuga's eyes were unfocused and he seemed to have trouble standing up straight… but he still shook his head when Tenten offered him a steadying hand.

"A natural suiken fighter," Gai murmured, almost too quiet to hear. "Who would have thought?" He straightened up when Tenten cleared

her throat.

"Send me the total once you've added it up," he said brusquely to the manager. "Tenten, please make sure Neji makes it home alright. Uzumaki-san and I will take care of Lee."

Tenten nodded, ignoring Neji's disgruntled expression as she took his arm. She gave Naruto a sly wink before turning away. Naruto helped Gai pick Lee up, who only shifted restlessly and hiccupped in his sleep. As they stepped outside, watching Tenten lead Neji out into the night, Gai lowered his voice as he spoke to Naruto. "You acted decisively to keep Lee from breaking the Hokage's law," he said.

Naruto shrugged. "I don't want him to get in trouble because of me," he said uncomfortably.

Gai shook his head. "He won't. I had no idea he could possibly have such a strong reaction to alcohol. Probably he had an ancestor or two that were gifted Drunken Fist masters. That's the only thing that would explain his hair-trigger reaction. We'll have to ensure he never has access to alcohol, unless it's an emergency."

"I think him having alcohol would be an emergency all by itself," Naruto said doubtfully.

"You didn't notice?" Gai asked, raising an eyebrow.

Naruto wondered what sort of effort it must be costing the loud jonin to speak in little more than a whisper. He just shook his head in response.

"Lee has never been able to get a decisive hit on Neji, for as long as they've sparred together. Tonight that was not the case." The jonin smiled. "I think the sake has revealed some of his true potential. Now all we need to realize that potential…"

"…is a lot of hard work," Naruto finished the sentence, smiling.

"You're catching on," Gai said with an unsettlingly wide and shiny smile. "Kurenai-sensei must be very proud."

Naruto looked down, his face reddening. When he looked up again, Gai and Lee were nowhere in sight.

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Shino sat quietly as the Aburame elders filed into the meeting room. As a clan, the bug users were far less formal than most, but they still observed certain protocols. Normally, only adult members of the clan were able to call for a meeting or bring new business before them. As an active-duty genin, Shino's status was unclear with regards to this rule – such a situation had never before arisen. But his father was more than willing to oblige him by calling for a meeting himself.

The eldest shinobi, Aburame Suba, brother to Shibi's father, looked every bit the part of the elder statesman as he took his seat at the head of the table. "Aburame Shibi, may we know the reason you have called for this meeting?" he asked as the others sat along the far side of the long table, facing the chairs of the petitioners.

Shino's father rose to his feet in a smooth and economical motion. "I have requested the attention of the council with regards to information acquired by my son."

Shino rose to his feet as all eyes turned toward him. In some ways, he supposed this was considered to be intimidating. Fortunately, he was unconcerned by such peripheral matters. "It has come to my attention that a grave injustice has been perpetuated, and that both myself and my clan have been a party to this undertaking," he began without preamble. "It is my intention to ascertain the degree to which this treachery was committed intentionally before I undertake further action."

Suba stared at his long-dead brother's grandchild for a moment. "Those are serious accusations. What is the nature of this betrayal? And who was the wronged party?"

"Ingratitude for services rendered unto the clan and Konohagakure," Shino replied, "and the person involved is Uzumaki Naruto."

Some of the council had obviously guessed at the purpose toward which he was in attendance, because the first objections were placed even as he finished speaking.

"Esteemed elder?" one of his older uncles, one Aburame Bataru, asked aloud.

"Yes, Bataru-san?" Suba replied.

"In light of Shino's youth and… lack of knowledge… regarding the relevant facts, I move that we table this discussion to avoid breaking certain village laws," Bataru continued, garnering several relieved nods from his fellows.

"If this lack of knowledge," Shino replied in a flat voice, "is with regards to Kyuubi no Kitsune, you may rest assured that I am fully aware of its existence sealed within my team mate."

"Who told you that?" Bataru demanded, anger evident in his voice. While even Suba's eyebrows had lifted at Shino's revelation, none of the others in the room had resorted to an outburst like that.

Shino idly wondered how long the man been a member of the council. "No one broke the Hokage's law, uncle," he replied coldly. "I was able to deduce the existence of Naruto's prisoner through sparring and training with him. When Uzumaki-san indirectly broached the topic with me, he merely confirmed my deductions." He paused. "As I told him at the time, I am neither stupid nor unobservant. Moreover, it is highly likely that, without the Kyuubi's chakra to draw on, our battle with the missing-nin would have had a far less optimal outcome."

Aburame Suba forestalled Bataru's objections with a raised hand. "We are aware that the vessel itself is exempt from the Hokage's

law, if it wishes to allow the truth to be known. But what is the nature of our clan's betrayal?"

"Your choice of pronoun speaks volumes, esteemed elder," Shino replied, returning to his flat voice. "Naruto's imprisonment of the Kyuubi no Kitsune, in accord with the Fourth Hokage's plan, is the only reason Konoha survived the attack. Yet he is literally shunned within our borders. The rancor of the adults is all too apparent, and he is disparaged at every opportunity by the same villagers he protects from the demon's wrath. I am ashamed to admit that I myself had acquired this low opinion of Uzumaki by listening to conversations between the adults as I matured. When it was announced that I was to be placed on a team with him, I accepted this assignment with only the greatest misgivings." Shino had begun pacing before the table as he talked, which was the only visible indication of his annoyance. His voice continued in a perfectly even tone, even as his choice of words grew sharp enough to draw blood.

"Instead, I discover a shinobi who has labored under severe handicaps for most of his life. Yet, with the introduction of even minimal support from his sensei, begins to progress at a rate I find unbelievable. Except for the fact that he regularly works sixteen hour days, or longer, constantly training… now that someone is finally willing to give him a chance." He stopped before the center of the table, straightening his dark glasses. "I find his actions to be well beyond the possibilities of a discontinuous variation in personality. He did not change like this overnight. I wish to know the reasons why I heard older clan-members openly disparaging my team mate, one of the most gifted and quite honestly the hardest working genin I have ever encountered?"

"He's always pulling pranks!" Bataru snarled as more than a few eyes turned toward him. "Did you not see what he did to the Hokage Monument?"

"Such acting out, desirous of provoking a reaction or some acknowledgement, is not unknown behavior in someone who is being socially isolated," Shino observed. "Given the fact that he has

yet to engage in such behavior since leaving the academy, it seems likely that you speak about a reaction to this conspiracy of isolation, rather than one of its antecedents."

"There are reports of theft from merchants, breakage and vandalism," Bataru countered. "However well behaved he is now, he was a public menace when he was younger."

Shino stared at the man. He remembered the way many of the merchants regarded his team mate, but more importantly he remembered how Naruto reacted… he looked away, avoided their hateful gazes, and otherwise tried to distract himself. "My apologies," he replied, deliberately allowing a quaver to enter his voice. "I was unaware of his past misbehavior. I'm sure his sensei will wish to deal with this personally." When Bataru nodded indulgently, he sprung the trap. "That being the case, if you will provide me with an itemized list of the offended parties, Kurenai-sensei can deduct the damages from his mission payments."

Bataru frowned. "List?"

"Of course," Shino replied. "If you have knowledge of these crimes, then justice must be done. Since any merchant will keep close track of any thefts or breakage as business losses for tax purposes, we should have quite a list to set straight."

"I don't have this information," Bataru snapped, the tightening skin visible around his glasses indicating that his eyes were narrowed.

"You don't?" Shino asked innocently. "Then how do you know that these incidents occurred?"

"I heard about them at council meetings," Bataru explained curtly.

"I see. Then as the clan representative to the council you can request the records from them," Shino concluded.

"I- I am not sure they were actually recorded," Bataru said quickly.

Aburame Suba was frowning visibly. "I was given to understand that the Uzumaki boy's predations were a matter of public record, Bataru-san. Is this not the case?"

"I, they talked about him almost every meeting," Bataru insisted, his stammering increasing and emotional equilibrium decreasing in proportion to each other. "Representatives from most of the guilds would voice their complaints, b-but everyone knew the Hokage favored the boy, and would hear no ill words about him. So some money was set aside in a fund to reimburse those who'd suffered losses, as long as they reported them to the council."

Shino stared at the man. "And who investigated these claims?" he asked.

"I… don't know," Bataru admitted.

"So, to sum this up," Shino said, beginning to pace again. "If representatives from one or more the merchants came forward with reports about Uzumaki Naruto stealing or damaging their merchandise, they would receive compensation from the Village Council. And you are unsure if the damage claims were ever investigated to determine their veracity. Uzumaki Naruto thereby acquired a reputation within the Village Council as a thief and criminal at a very young age. The various representatives attending these council meetings report this information back to their organizations, and soon everyone in Konoha knows of his reputation."

Shino stopped pacing and spun on his heel right in front of Bataru's section of the table. "But there appears to be no proof that any of these claims are truthful," he spat, making his now least-favorite uncle flinch backward slightly.

"He's still a damn demon," Aburame Bataru snarled, completely losing control of his emotions.

"No," Shino corrected. "He's the demon's *jailor.* We, of all people should understand that what someone holds inside themselves is not the sum total of their being. I've dealt with that issue among my peers, as I am sure each of you have done at some point. Many cannot look beyond our allies. The presence of kikai bugs hosted within our bodies makes it impossible for many to relate to us in any meaningful way. But just because I have two colonies of kikai," he continued, ignoring the startled looks several elders shot his father, "doesn't mean I *am* a kikai… just as Uzumaki Naruto containing the Kyuubi no Kitsune doesn't mean he *is* the demon." He shook his head in what was undoubtedly a somewhat theatrical manner, but meeting with the elders had tarnished his conception of them. Bataru was the worst of them, but they seemed far more emotional and far less rational than he'd expected. His father was a far clearer thinker than most of them, and he'd yet to be offered a seat at this table.

"Given what I have heard today," Shino concluded, "I think it is clear how this deception was perpetrated. I will take my leave of you now, and will not trouble you further." He bowed and turned to leave.

"What are your plans?" Aburame Suba's voice stopped him as he approached the door to the chamber.

Shino stopped and turned back toward the gathered elders. "I cannot, in good conscience, remain a member of a clan willing to engage in such slanderous activities. As such, I plan to visit the Hokage's offices and file papers requesting formal emancipation from the Aburame clan. I will move to an apartment within Konoha and trouble you no further."

Shino had often wondered about the saying "you could hear a pin drop", considering it an exaggeration at best. But the silence that followed his words appeared to a very close approximation to just such a condition.

Aburame Suba turned toward his nephew, Shibi, raising an eyebrow.

"Misato and I will support our son in whatever he considers to be the most honorable path for him to take," Shino's father replied urbanely as he opened up a portfolio and shuffled some documents around. Shino didn't imagine his sire to be overly pleased at such a thing, but he found himself… oddly moved at this show of support.

The angry murmurs between the elders were increasing in volume, and Shino felt his colonies begin to react to the pheromones released by a considerable number of perturbed kikai.

"Silence!" Aburame Suba snapped, his voice cutting across the muttering like a kunai. "Aburame Shino, you have more than made your point. It appears, in all likelihood, that we have been party to something we never should have been," the elder concluded, ignoring Bataru as he half-rose from his chair. "Rest assured that I will get to the bottom of this," he continued, "and we will make amends as they are needed." He paused. "I ask only that you take no precipitous action until we have concluded our investigation. Is that acceptable?"

Shino bowed deeply. This was a far greater concession than he had hoped for, thus it behooved him to be gracious. "I thank you for your consideration, honored elder," he said in the formal manner.

After he left the chamber with his father, Shino found his hands trembling for some strange reason. From a physiological perspective, he supposed it was from nervous tension, but he hadn't felt that nervous beforehand. This was highly curious, and something he noted to himself to pursue at a later date. "What do you anticipate being the outcome of their deliberations?" he asked his father quietly.

Aburame Shibi was quiet for a moment. "Some will argue that you are attempting to force them to action via threats, something which should not be encouraged. But I think Bataru will be reassigned to other duties in the near future, and someone with greater ability to detect deception will be in his place. Beyond that I can only speculate."

Shino nodded. "Your support at the end was appreciated," he said.

"Your mother would be highly displeased by such an occurrence," Shibi observed, "but your commitment to correctness of action is commendable and must be supported whenever possible."

They were silent the rest of the way back to their home.

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Naruto was happy to see Hinata join them early the next morning at training area twenty three. He was half-afraid her father would have forbidden her to come once he found out. Or had he? Naruto decided to leave well enough alone and just not ask. Her manner was somewhat diffident, but she smiled slightly when he said good morning. Life was good.

Lee definitely looked somewhat worse for the wear that morning. He evidently strained several muscles the previous night when he'd trashed the restaurant, and was in no condition to do anything very strenuous until they had a day or so to recover. So Gai asked Naruto and Hinata to spar again, and worked with each of them on their forms.

To Hinata's obvious surprise, Gai-sensei appeared to have learned a lot about Jyuuken from having Neji on his team. Naruto's respect for his abilities as a teacher went up another notch when he began working on the subtle details of Hinata's footwork – just like he'd done for Naruto. Hinata's face seemed to run the gamut of emotions, ranging from shock that an outsider could be so knowledgeable about her clan's unique taijutsu, to gratification that he was willing to spend so much time with her.

Naruto began to entertain some doubts about that 'special Hyuuga training' she'd gone through, but he kept them to himself.

Gai also suggested that Hinata might want to learn some basic goken forms as well. Not only would it improve her ability to defend against conventional taijutsu, but it would also give her something to

fall back on if her chakra reserves were exhausted. The Hyuuga girl accepted this reasoning, and while she was a little awkward at first, working on forms in tandem with Naruto seemed to help her settle down.

At the end of the class, Gai presented Naruto and Hinata with some specialized inserts for their wrist and ankle weights. The metallic slugs had been graven with special seals, so if chakra was pushed into them in the correct manner, their apparent density and weight increased to a large degree.

"I was wondering what we would do after all the weights were in," Naruto said as the light of comprehension dawned. "If these things got much bigger, they would start to get in the way."

Gai nodded seriously. "Without these special weights, Lee would never be able to see his feet again."

For some reason, Naruto found this image outrageously funny and nearly collapsed on the ground laughing. Hinata resisted the urge, but couldn't help but smile at her team mate.

After a hurried breakfast, he and Hinata made a quick trip to see Tenten's father and pick up some replacement gear. He'd managed to lose several kunai and almost half of his shuriken on the patrol mission, but he had more than enough money to replace his losses from the mission pay alone, let alone his share of the bounties.

Most of the bounty money had been deposited, he reminded himself as he tore his eyes away from the stacks of explosive tags. He really needed to learn a jutsu that made explosions, but he somehow doubted Kurenai-sensei would be teaching him that any time soon.

Even with their detour, they still made it to their designated meeting place with plenty of time to spare. Shino was there already, greeting them with a raised hand. Naruto couldn't be sure, but his team mate seemed to be more… relaxed? At least more than he'd been the previous day. Naruto was curious, but knew better than to ask.

When Kurenai arrived, she made a point of checking their gear to make sure they'd followed instructions, and then told stories of several shinobi teams who'd flubbed important missions, in one case losing a team member, because they either didn't bring the appropriate gear, or had a crucial item break at a bad time. By the time she was done, Naruto was carefully checking over the kunai he *hadn't* replaced.

It wasn't until they were halfway to the Hokage's tower to get a mission that Naruto noticed the faint smile on her face. He bit his tongue, but wondered when he'd have the opportunity for another Lee-henge-style prank for his sensei.

Going back to regular D-rank missions was almost a let down, in a way. That didn't stop them from working to make sure it was completed as quickly and efficiently as possible. Shino was the original driving force behind that, but Naruto and Hinata soon took it on as a challenge as well. Competing to see how quickly they could locate the Fire Lord's wife's cat gave them something to work toward, rather than simply becoming bored with the routine mission.

After the quickest cat-capture they'd managed so far—courtesy of Shino's kikai bug that was still in residence under the cat's collar—their second mission was a little unusual. They were tasked with demolishing an abandoned building on the outskirts of the village, outside the defensive wall. The decrepit structure might once have been intended as a livery stable, but now it was little more than an eyesore. Naruto was hoping Kurenai-sensei would take the opportunity to teach them a fire jutsu. But when he broached the topic, she reminded them that fires could burn out of control far too easily.

And so they were left with physically breaking down the structure to minimize the potential for collateral damage. As usual, each member of Team Eight found different ways to best use their abilities. Shino's bugs immediately began eating away at the building's remaining support members, turning the thick beams into sawdust. Naruto got to practice some of the goken power moves that he'd learned from

Gai-sensei, while Hinata used her Byakugan to help locate load-bearing stress points within the structure that should be targeted first.

It was a dirty, nasty job, and even slightly dangerous when it came time to bring down the roof. But for all that it was over soon enough. When the building was flattened, Kurenai stared at her filthy subordinates. Each of them was smeared with sawdust, grime, and cobwebs from the old stable.

"I think that's enough missions for today," she said firmly. "We can pick up the pay tomorrow when we report in."

Naruto frowned up at the sun. "Isn't it a little early to quit now?"

Kurenai just rolled her eyes.

"Ano," Hinata offered quietly, "I'm not sure we are really presentable anymore. Not to see the Hokage anyway."

Naruto looked down at his jacket and frowned. He tried to brush off the worst of the mess, but only managed to grind most of it deeper into the fabric.

Kurenai left, saying she needed to check on something, as the three genin re-entered the village and trudged up the street.

"You know," Naruto said after a while, "that was kind of fun."

Shino nodded a fraction of an inch. "Overtly destructive behavior is normally frowned upon. Therefore, being placed in a situation where it is not only allowed, but encouraged, would be a pleasant contrast."

"Er, right," Naruto said dubiously. He leaned back, catching Hinata's eyes behind Shino's back, and making her smile as he rolled his eyes.

"A precise manner of speaking is not a liability," Shino reminded them. His head hadn't turned at all, nor had he given any other sign

of noticing their byplay. "Though I suppose it might be considered out of character for some," he concluded.

"Are you saying I'm stupid?" Naruto asked with mock belligerence.

"No," Shino answered. "Merely imprecise."

"Oh," Naruto replied, nodding slowly. "That's all right then." He held his face in an innocently stupid expression long enough for Shino to glance toward him and sigh. The blond genin laughed out loud.

Hinata didn't join in, but she did smile fondly at her team mates.

As inevitable as gravity, when Team Eight finished their missions early, they tended to end up at Ichiraku's. The place was fairly quiet before the dinner rush began, and the old man who ran the place seemed to have developed a liking for Naruto and his team mates. It also didn't hurt that Naruto's work ethic and metabolism left him hungry, in varying degrees—typically from 'quite' to 'very'—most of the day.

He was on his third bowl (the others barely into their first) when he looked up from his food and swallowed hard.

Limping down the street were the members of Team Seven, looking rather the worse for wear. All of them were covered with half-healed scratches and cuts, their uniforms ragged and frayed in places. Even the normally impeccably groomed Uchicha looked like he'd been thoroughly mauled at some point in the recent past.

Naruto swallowed and elbowed his team mates. Hinata gasped quietly when she saw them.

"Oi!" Naruto called out. "What happened to you guys?" Any rancor he might have retained toward his former classmates was overridden by his curiosity. Anything that could do that to *Sasuke* …

Kiba's head snapped around, nearly dislodging Akamaru from his perch. He smirked, and began walking slowly toward Ichiraku's. Sasuke frowned, but Sakura appeared to persuade him to follow their boisterous team mate.

"We just came back from an A-ranked mission!" the dog-user announced in a loud voice. Old man Teuchi looked up from his broth pot and fixed the Inuzuka with a gimlet eye, making the boy duck his head.

"I understand that your team was given a C-ranked mission," Shino observed.

"We were," Sakura said as she joined them. When the old man's glare shifted to her, she quickly sat down and ordered a bowl of vegetable-flavored ramen.

Kiba's nostril dilated and his stomach growled, a high-pitched noise that made Akamaru peer down at his master. He quickly ordered a bowl of beef ramen, as did Sasuke. The old man filled their orders without a word, evidently having a long memory.

"Anyway," Kiba continued. "Turns out the old drunk who hired us was lying about the mission. He had a missing nin after him, but he couldn't afford to pay for an A or B-ranked mission, so he pretended he was just afraid of bandits."

"You should be more respectful of Tazuna-san," Sakura scolded her team mate.

"If he'd told the truth, he'd still be alive today," Sasuke said coldly.

Kiba frowned. "Yeah, well, it was a mess. There were four of them, only one of them was just a kid our age. But the older one was this guy called Zabuza of the Mist. Kakashi says that facing someone like that automatically made it an A-ranked mission."

"Ano, is that what happened to you?" Hinata asked in a sympathetic voice.

Sakura nodded and Kiba continued his tale. "They were pretty tricky. We fought two on the way down, but they were punks. Me and Sasuke held them off and Kakashi nailed 'em. Some losers called the Demon Brothers. But that eyebrow-less freak was tough. He fought Kakashi-sensei to a standstill until he got sharinganed. Then that kid showed up and acted like he'd killed him." He shrugged. "After he recovered, they came back and attacked Tazuna at the bridge." Kiba opened up his jacket and rapped his knuckles against the thick leather armor underneath. "If I hadn't been wearing this, Haku's senbon needles would have cut me to pieces."

Sakura nodded. "He moved so fast that Sasuke-kun was the only one who could catch him."

Sasuke grunted.

Kiba shrugged. "We fought him while Kakashi-sensei had another re-match with Zabuza. This time, Zabuza didn't get away. Kakashi-sensei did this assassination technique on him…" he shuddered. "He didn't have a chance after Kakashi-sensei's summoned dogs pinned him down. Haku surrendered after that. He was only fighting for Zabuza, and if Akamaru hadn't latched onto his leg, I think he was going to try and throw himself between Kakashi and Zabuza to save his master." Akamaru let out a yip when his name was mentioned, but Kiba's frown grew darker.

"He said… he was just a tool," Sasuke said in a quiet voice.

"When was this?" Sakura asked in confusion.

"When I was resting after the tree-climbing exercise," Sasuke answered. "He approached me in civilian garb, pretending to be a villager. He mentioned having a precious person, and how he would do anything for them." The Uchiha frowned. "I didn't realize it was the same person until after Kiba broke his mask."

Kiba shook his head. "That makes more sense now. After Zabuza died, the gangster who hired him showed up. One of his men shot Tazuna with an arrow and they were about to unload on us when Gatou spit on Zabuza's body." The larger boy let out a sigh. "Haku was standing in place, staring at Zabuza's body. He didn't say a word when Gatou's men seized him. But the second Gatou degraded Zabuza, it was like he just disappeared. Suddenly men were dying left and right, then Zabuza's sword disappeared and the next thing we know Gatou was spitted on it like a fish." Kiba shook his head.

"And then Haku appeared in front of Kakashi-sensei," Sakura said. "He said that Zabuza had once forbidden him to take his own life, so he asked Kakashi-sensei to kill him."

Naruto eyes had grown wide at this tale. "Did he?" he asked.

Sakura shook her head. "No, he hit Haku on the neck and knocked him out."

"We just got finished carrying him back," Kiba said. "Kakashi-sensei said capturing someone like that would probably earn us a bonus as well."

"But we failed in our primary mission," Sasuke added darkly.

"At least," Sakura added quickly, glancing at her team mate, "with Gatou dead, Tsunami and the others have enough money to hire a construction crew to complete the bridge. So Tazuna-san's dream of finishing the bridge will be fulfilled, right?"

Sasuke nodded silently, then rose from his stool, leaving some coins on the counter. He stalked off without looking back.

"Man, he makes me want to smack him so hard," Kiba muttered.

"Don't!" Sakura said sharply. "Just… don't. Please." She turned back toward Team Eight. "Sasuke-kun is just upset that his first big

mission wasn't a total success. Kakashi-sensei said we did very well, but Sasuke-kun expects a lot from himself."

Naruto nodded faintly.

"So," Sakura added brightly, obviously trying to change the subject. "Anything interesting happen in Konoha while we were gone?"

Naruto opened his mouth, but then shut it. What was the use? "Nothing really. Just a lot of missions."

Sakura nodded faintly, but her eyes appeared troubled.

Naruto ate quietly until Sakura and Kiba finished. As soon as they were gone, Hinata spoke up. "Ano, Naruto-kun, why didn't you tell them about our mission."

Naruto shrugged. "Why didn't you?"

That question left Hinata speechless for a moment, but Shino stepped in. "She probably wondered why you were hesitating, and assumed you had a valid reason for doing so. Now, we would like to hear it."

Naruto snorted, but then his face went serious. "I don't know, it just… didn't feel right. You know, to act like we were bragging when they were all so down about their mission."

"These are the same people who picked a fight with you the last time you saw them," Shino pointed out.

"Yeah," Naruto conceded, "but it's… different now, isn't it? People *died* , you know. On both missions." He broke off for a second when he realized that Hinata was staring at him. "I don't know - it just didn't feel right," he concluded lamely.

There was no further conversation as they finished their meal.

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Kurenai frowned as she approached the Hokage's tower, thinking about the scroll Shino had slipped her between missions earlier that day.

She was slightly surprised by the degree to which the silent boy had taken the initiative in dealing with his clan. The anger she'd noted during their return to Konoha must have run deeper than she'd expected. While it was gratifying that at least on clan was revising their opinion of Naruto, his information regarding *how* those lies had been spread was far more illuminating. Someone with considerable influence on the Village Council was abusing their power in an attempt to subvert the will of both the Third and the Fourth Hokages.

She sat through the meeting of jonin instructors, preoccupied by Shino's revelation, until she realized the purpose of the gathering.

"…and while it is allowed for newly graduated genin to compete in the chuunin exam, it is up to the individual instructors to determine whether they feel their students are ready or not," the Sandaime continued. "Given the dangers, I suggest you give it a lot of thought."

Kurenai's mind raced as the meeting ended. Kakashi had returned from his mission, looking somewhat worse for the wear. He glanced at her, his single exposed eye crinkling in a manner that suggested he was smiling under that ridiculous mask. "I don't know about you," he said in a conversational tone, "but I'm going to give my team the option if they want to."

Kurenai merely raised an eyebrow. "You think they are ready?" She challenged.

Kakashi's manner went deadly serious with a speed that still caught her by surprise. "They faced death on their last mission, and had to deal with some very dangerous missing nins."

Kurenai nodded. "As did mine," she added with an enigmatic smile.

Of course, at that point they had little choice but to retire to Moritake's for a mutual game of question and answer. Kakashi's description of their fake mission was rather grueling, making Kurenai wince at certain points, but the infamous copy-cat ninja lost his fabled cool when she described the end of the melee with the kidnappers.

"You mean Naruto, *Uzuamaki Naruto* , the loudest ninja in the village?" Kakashi demanded. "The only person I ever saw who dressed worse that Gai? He took out two missing nins himself?"

Kurenai nodded, fighting to keep a smug grin off of her face. The battle had been a close thing, but the effort invested in her "special project" had more than paid off. "Both of them were listed in the Bingo Book as high-B / low-A in classification, so they were no pushovers."

Kakashi leaned back in his chair, his eye staring into the distance. "It'll be interesting to see how your students match up against mine in the Chuunin Exams," he finally said.

Kurenai nodded, only then realizing that her mind was already made up. For at least two of her charges, becoming a chuunin might offer them some security from the forces acting against them. And taking the exam when it was held in Konoha also cuts down the potential dangers. And while she would not be there for the actual tests, for the most part they would have each other to rely on.

She would at least offer them the option, but she knew there was little doubt that Team Eight would go for it like they did most things. Together.

Author's Notes:

I'd like to thank Runsamok and Bibliophile for excellent Beta-work.

Yes, I am finally getting to the Chuunin exam. The timing is about right, given how vague things are left in canon.

I references to the background on Ibiki and Idate given in the Great Race story arc – with the understanding that very little of the truth would be known to the general public.

I also hope I've sufficiently spelled out how Kurenai knows who Ibiki is in this story (when she didn't at this point in the canon timeline.) It's not a 'canon error' – it's deliberate. The AU divergence point from canon is rooted in a single event that occurred before Naruto was even born. Everything else that has changed has been a consequence of a single decision that was made.

Just something to consider when reading.

-Matthew

# My Dinner with Aburame

Chapter 11

"You want us to test for Chuunin?" Naruto asked, amazed. He couldn't believe his sensei, who arranged extra training so he could become a respectable genin, actually thought he was now ready to become a chuunin! He looked around their usual training area, wondering if this was a prank of some sort.

"I am willing to authorize you three to participate in the Chuunin Exam," Kurenai clarified.

Naruto frowned. That was what he'd just said, wasn't it?

"I believe Kurenai-sensei is specifying that the choice is ours," Shino explained.

"A-ano," Hinata said in a hesitant voice, the unexpected news having evidently made her fall back on older, more tentative mannerisms, "isn't it unusual for a team to take the exam during their first year?"

Kurenai nodded. "It is, but I think it would be a valuable training experience for all of you. Also, with the exam being held in Konoha, it should be fairly safe, while still giving you three a chance to see what it is like. That will increase your chances for success at a later date."

Naruto frowned a little. "You make it sound like we're guaranteed to fail," he objected.

Kurenai shook her head. "Not quite, but the odds are very low. Keep in mind how rare it is that rookie genin teams are allowed to participate at all. At the same time, teams of any age taking the exam for the second time have a much higher rate of success."

"You say it's rare for rookie teams to be allowed," Shino observed. "Are any of our former classmates to participate?"

Kurenai nodded. "Asuma and Kakashi are giving their teams the option as well."

"That means Lee and his team will be there as well," Naruto added. There was no way Gai-sensei would let his "eternal rival's" team trump his.

"It would be prudent that our first exposure to the exam occur in the company of allies," Shino observed.

Naruto grunted. "I agree, except that part about us being guaranteed to fail," he said with a scowl.

Kurenai took a deep breath. "That is merely a matter of statistical fact, Naruto. However, I *do* expect you three to make a good showing. There is no reason you cannot outperform your classmates, and in fact I expect you to do so! If, after all your hard work, you are shown up by Asuma's genin, I will never hear the end of it… and therefore neither will you. Do I make myself clear?" Her voice had gone a little frosty at the end, so Naruto merely nodded and refrained from saying anything else.

The group sparring exercises they did together before their mission were particularly grueling, but no one complained.

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Kurenai allowed herself a small smile as her team quartered the affluent neighborhood Shino's bugs had tracked the cat to this time. It had been too long since she'd been around adolescent males; she'd forgotten how competitive they could be. Their determination to pass the Chuunin Exam on their first attempt, as rookies, no less, was as laudable as it was impractical.

Still, Naruto tended to prove people wrong, especially those who doubted him. Kurenai wondered what kinds of odds Asuma would give her…

She shook her head. Such conduct was unbecoming to a Konoha Jonin. At least, betting for money would be. Perhaps a wager of forfeits could be negotiated. Forcing Asuma to give up cigarettes or Kakashi to forgo his 'little orange books' for a month… could prove to be highly entertaining. Of course there was also the matter of *her* forfeits. She was fairly certain that playing to their male egos could let her avoid anything *too* onerous.

At the same time, she was guiltily glad that Iruka was still convalescing from his injuries. If he'd been there when the three of them volunteered their rookie teams, the man was sure to object. Still, she would make a point to break the news to him personally, and explain why she was anxious for her students to make chuunin as quickly as possible.

Kurenai shook her head to clear it of such extraneous thoughts as Hinata led her teammates back, carrying the pampered and escape-prone housecat in her arms. Before their meeting, Shino had intercepted his teacher on the way to the team's usual meeting place. He had had a proposal, one she was rather surprised to hear. But it was a good idea, one long in coming.

"After we return the cat," Kurenai began as they walked up to Hinata, "we will break for the day. Naruto, Hinata, I know you've been working hard pretty much every evening since we returned, but I'd prefer that you refrain from unsupervised training until the exam starts."

Unsurprisingly, Naruto scowled at this. Hinata's reaction, however, was just as visibly dismayed – at least by her standards. Kurenai secretly congratulated herself for nudging those two toward each other, but held up her hand to get their attention.

"First of all, I don't want you to risk injuring or exhausting yourself when the exam is less than a week away. Secondly, there are many visitors entering Konoha for the exams. Training by yourselves presents a significant risk. I'm not saying you two are incapable of defending yourselves – I'm more worried about a potential

competitor spying on you to learn your techniques and tactics. It's unavoidable that you will reveal much during the exams. That is one of the purposes behind having them after all. But I'd rather you didn't give away any more than you have to."

Naruto looked thoughtful during this explanation, and finally nodded. Hinata acquiesced as well, though she looked somewhat crestfallen.

"If that is the case," Shino said, interjecting into the silence that followed. "I would like to extend an invitation to all of you for dinner with my family."

Naruto actually jumped a little. Kurenai didn't think he'd actually forgotten his silent teammate was there… but it was rarely enough that he interrupted anyone that it was just as surprising. She also suspected that, deep down, Shino *enjoyed* twitting his teammate like that.

But what Naruto did next was even more distracting. As his teammate's words registered, Naruto's eyes grew very wide. "A-are you serious?" he asked in a shocked voice. The naked emotion on the boy's face made Kurenai feel slightly sick. It was a bald reminder of how he'd been treated for so long… a deliberate isolation that made her ill when she allowed her thoughts to dwell upon it.

"It was a serious request," Shino replied smoothly. "My parents have expressed a desire to meet with my teammates, and this is a logical social mechanism for facilitating such a gathering."

"I would be honored to meet your parents, Shino-kun," Hinata replied gravely, making a short bow.

Naruto blinked and then nodded. "Uh, yeah, Shino, that would be cool."

"Unfortunately," Kurenai said, "I have to attend a meeting the Hokage has called for all the jonin tonight." While there was a

meeting scheduled to go over security arrangements for the upcoming Chuunin Exam, she could probably beg off if she wanted.

But if she attended this gathering, her presence would undoubtedly influence it in many ways. Hinata and Naruto were her subordinates, and would no doubt defer to her when they met with the Aburames, just as they let her do the talking with the Hokage or even with that pig, Dariketsu. That was only proper, and in accord with the respect a genin should show for their jonin-sensei.

However, it would also prevent the Aburames from meeting the *real* Hinata and Naruto. The Hyuuga girl was repressed enough under normal circumstances, and Naruto had his undeserved reputation working against him. But they were both good kids, and Kurenai felt that people intelligent enough to raise Shino would no doubt see that for themselves… and do so all the better if they were acting normally.

Shino nodded gravely. "Given the timing of the exam, this may be the last free night we have for a while, so with your permission we will go ahead with it."

Kurenai waved her hand dismissively. "Feel free. Your free time is your own. That goes for all of you," she added.

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Hinata was surprised and a little anxious about the unexpected invitation. Of course, she'd attended innumerable clan functions as a member of the Hyuuga Main Family, but what her teammate described sounded a lot more informal than that. She had some formal kimonos she could wear, but she thought those might be too dressy.

As Kurenai left for her meeting and Shino went ahead to bring word of their acceptance to his parents, Hinata's eyes flickered over toward Naruto. It was then that several pieces slid into place for her. No, she wouldn't wear a kimono. She knew from their camping trip that Naruto didn't have many clothes aside from his uniforms and a

few t-shirts and pairs of shorts. Certainly nothing dressy. And he didn't have time to purchase something before the dinner. She would sooner take poison than embarrass her friend by dressing up and making him appear shabby by comparison.

She was also heartened to know that Shino had been as good as his word. This invitation was proof that he was making headway with his clan regarding Naruto-kun. Given the reactions she'd seen on the street, she doubted anyone would willingly invite Uzumaki Naruto into their home without strong persuasion.

She was jolted out of her reverie when the subject of her thoughts hesitantly tugged on her sleeve. "Er, Hinata," Naruto asked, hesitantly.

"Y-yes, Naruto?" she answered, damning herself for the quaver that still showed up at times. She was much more comfortable talking to him than she ever thought she would be… but sometimes he would catch her off balance and her old habits would reassert themselves.

"Uh, I, well, you see…" he began, but let his voice trail off. "What am I supposed to do?" he finally asked, his frustration clearly overriding his nervousness.

"Do?" Hinata asked, confused.

"About this dinner thing," he added. "Am I supposed to bring something? How do I dress? What am I supposed to say?"

Hinata blinked and quickly bit her lip. Of course Uzumaki Naruto had never been invited for dinner at someone's house before. He had no idea what to do, and it clearly distressed him. Hinata surmised that Naruto realized what a break from custom Shino's invitation represented and didn't want to waste it. Without thinking, she let her free hand rest on his wrist in a comforting gesture. "I understand, Naruto-kun, I-I think this is mostly going to be an informal affair. Shino just invited us today, so probably no special preparation is expected. Our uniforms are still clean, and will be appropriate if they

remain so." Her wardrobe suspicions were confirmed when Naruto let out a relieved sigh.

His eyes flickered down to her hand on his and Hinata quickly withdrew hers with a rosy blush. But he didn't tease her about it. "Thanks, Hinata-chan," he said sincerely. "I guess you know more about this kind of stuff, huh?"

She nodded. "I had a lot of lessons on etiquette and protocols from Father, as well as the kunoichi lectures."

Naruto's eyes darkened when she mentioned her father, but she had no idea how to ask him about that without seeming to pry. "Well, I'll just watch you a lot then," he said with an impudent grin.

The idea of Naruto-kun watching *her* , taking cues from *her* actions, was enough to set the blood to flooding her cheeks again.

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Naruto shifted his weight nervously from one foot to the other as Hinata pressed a lacquered tile set into the doorframe. Faint chimes could be heard through the door. Shino's parents lived with the other Aburames in a neighborhood informally known as 'The Hive' to the rest of Konoha. Given their hobbies, it seemed that other people were reluctant to live in close proximity, Shino had observed as he gave them directions. But that made it easier for them to buy up all the adjoining real estate.

Naruto had thought about that as his teammate departed to let his parents know how many were coming for dinner. He had personal experience with how intolerant some people could be. It made him feel just a little better that it wasn't only him that suffered for it. He snuck a glance at his teammate as she clasped her hands in front of her stomach in a nervous gesture. Being in a prestigious family didn't guarantee you'd be treated well either.

He suppressed the surge of resentment that always accompanied such thoughts these days. This wasn't the time for it.

The door opened and what seemed to be a larger version of Shino stood in the doorway.

As Naruto hoped, Hinata took the lead. "We are honored to be invited to your home, Aburame-sama," she said, deliberately using the more deferential, polite form as they both bowed deeply.

Shino's father politely inclined his head. "You may call me Shibi," he said gravely, "That is an unusual method of address, coming from a Hyuuga," he observed as he moved aside to allow them entry.

Hinata's cheeks colored, and Naruto didn't have to be reminded how the Hyuugas were considered first among Konoha's ninja clans. Her father's arrogance during their last mission had made an indelible impression on his mind. And it made Hinata's humility and politeness all the more noteworthy, even if such attention flustered her. "Well, you're still Shino's dad," Naruto said with a shrug, as if that explained everything.

Like his son, Shibi wore dark glasses, even inside his own home, so his eyes were unreadable as they gazed at Naruto for a moment. He nodded slightly, as if in acknowledgement, and then led them toward a sitting room where he informed them that his wife and son were waiting.

At this point, Naruto was expecting Shino's mother to be much like her husband and son, except perhaps with a slightly more feminine jacket. He could not have been more wrong.

The lady of the house wore an emerald green tunic over long pants. The former had an exotic cut to it and the color matched her eyes perfectly. The fact that her eyes were visible was a shock of its own, but her behavior was even more so.

"You must be Naruto and Hinata," she said, rising from her seat with a large smile. "Welcome to our home."

They began to bow, Naruto watching Hinata from the corner of his eye to make sure he went far enough, but she waved them off. "No need for that, this isn't a meeting of the clan elders, otherwise Shino would be bullying people and making them feel stupid. We just want to get to know our son's friends. I'm Misato, and I see you've met Shibi-kun already."

Both the Aburame males looked chagrined at different points in her speech.

Naruto looked up and locked gazes with the cheerful woman. She didn't hesitate, or refuse to meet his eyes. Naruto saw curiosity and good-natured teasing in abundance, but no fear. "You're not from around here, are you?" he asked. He hadn't intended to voice the question out loud, and the sound of his own voice startled him just a bit.

"Not a bit," she said. "I met my husband when he was the official envoy to Hidden Mist." She smiled over at her husband. "He was so serious and solemn that I never stood a chance. His assignment ended right after Shino was born and all three of us returned to Konoha."

Naruto looked over at Shino with raised eyebrows. He never knew Shino hadn't been born in Konoha. Not that it really made a difference, but it underlined how little he really knew about his friend.

"Anyway," Misato concluded, "that's why I'm a little livelier than these two." She cracked a teasing grin as Shino and Shibi both raised visible eyebrows above their glasses. "I had such hopes for Shino, too… he was such a pretty baby, always laughing and so ticklish." Her eyes took on a wicked glint as she exercised her parental prerogative to embarrass her child in front of his peers.

"A-Ano," Hinata interjected. "S-Shino is very lively," she continued, defending her friend. "He's just, er, quiet."

"Yeah," Naruto added quickly. "He makes up for me being so loud."

Shino let out an audible sigh from behind his jacket collar.

"Shino…" Misato said in a tragic voice, her eyes dancing with mischief. "This *is* the first time you've brought friends home. I have a lot of time to make up for."

"Perhaps," Shibi countered, "we can continue this discussion over dinner, as that was the reason our guests were invited."

"Very well," Misato agreed and started leading them toward an archway. "The roasted termites are probably about done, but they won't stay crispy for long."

Naruto paused for a moment as his brain struggled with some disconcerting mental images. He swallowed heavily and silently renewed his vow to do nothing that would spoil the evening.

"She has an… unusual sense of humor," Shino muttered quietly as he fell into step next to him.

"I heard that," Misato said as she entered the dining room.

"And good hearing, too," Naruto commented.

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Fortunately for Hinata, the dinner was fairly normal fare for Konoha, although prepared with obvious precision. She'd had to eat some unusual things at formal dinners, but she wasn't sure she could eat roasted bugs without some time to prepare herself. Shino's mother was *not* what she'd expected, especially after meeting his father on the border patrol mission. But while Misato had definitely caught them off-balance, she was still quite nice – in addition to being a good cook. Her sense of humor reminded Hinata of Naruto at his pranking best – teasing and playful, but never deliberately cruel.

The conversation over the dinner table was somewhat more serious, as Shino's parents set to learning more about their son's comrades. However, Misato had obvious difficulty keeping a straight face once

Naruto confirmed that the rumors about Maito Gai were fairly accurate. Naruto's imitation of his taijutsu tutor's "power of youth" rant was uncannily accurate. It also left Misato looking like she was about to injure herself or at least collapse due to lack of air.

They seemed a bit surprised at the training regimen that she and Naruto adhered to. Objectively, she knew that many kunoichi her age desired more free time to be with friends and family or just to have fun. But her shyness meant she had few friends, even if Father would have allowed her to make friends outside the clan. Shameful as it was to admit, the less time she spent around her family, the better she seemed to feel. Training with Naruto and going on missions with her team was, in fact, about the most enjoyable thing she could think of to do.

Hinata was seized with a vague sense of wrongness when she thought about how different her life seemed to be, compared to other genin. But dwelling on that didn't seem to be a good idea. Getting stronger, helping Naruto and Shino become stronger… those were good things. Productive things. Things she could actually make a difference in.

When they finished their recital of "A Day in the Life of Team Eight", Shino's parents exchanged a look. "Your assessment of the relative deficits was accurate," Aburame Shibi said, turning toward Shino. "While I do not, at this time, believe you are a liability, that may change soon. You will now spend the mornings working with your mother on her weapons specialty."

Hinata wasn't sure what that referred to, but given the speed at which Shino turned toward Aburame Misato, it seemed to be important.

The woman shrugged and gave a lazy grin that was almost a smirk. "I promised my teacher I wouldn't pass anything along to someone not of the village, but technically, you *were* born there."

Shino nodded slowly. "I see." He turned back toward his father. "And the breeding project?"

"It will continue," Shibi confirmed. "But as your Uncle Bataru's replacement, I can assign one of the other clan members to take charge of the maintenance. It is, after all, a project that will benefit the clan as a whole if it is successful."

"Project?" Naruto asked, his curiosity finally getting the better of him.

Shino took a deep breath, but paused and looked at his friend. He shook his head briefly. "Faster bugs," was all he said.

"Really?" Naruto asked. "Cool."

"So are you looking forward to the chuunin exam?" Misato asked, obviously steering the conversation onto safer ground.

Hinata couldn't help a small smile as Naruto talked about the exam, his natural enthusiasm eroding any lingering awkwardness. Thought she did wish he hadn't included her when he stated that 'Team 8 would kick everyone's butt and all make chuunin'.

"You do remember our sensei stating the odds of rookie genin passing the test?" Shino asked in a slightly acid tone.

"Never tell me the odds," Naruto said firmly. "Besides," he added. "We have Hinata-chan on our side! Right, Hinata-chan?"

Hyuuga Hinata promptly wished she knew a Doton jutsu she could use to sink through the floor. Her face grew redder as Naruto unabashedly boasted of her finishing off the shinobi that broke into the Hokage's tower, and how she pierced the kidnappers' genjutsu and rescued her sister with "spectacular acrobatics".

Oddly enough, when Misato asked Naruto what he'd done in those fights, he just shrugged and said "I hit them a few times." He paused. "Well, more than a few times if you count the kage bunshin."

While Misato seemed to lead the questioning, Shino's father just listened quietly for the most part. But Shibi's attention still felt like a physical weight when he was focused upon you. Hinata was slightly uncomfortable with how that reminded her of her father in some respects, but his gaze seemed to lack the anger that always simmered in her father's eyes. Of course dealing with years of failures on her part had to have a lot to do with that, she realized.

The time passed with surprising speed, and before they knew it dinner was over and they were lingering over one last cup of tea with the Aburames.

"Thank you for inviting us into your home," Hinata said in a formal tone as the evening seemed to be winding down. Naruto nodded his agreement and Hinata had to suppress a blush. It was… odd, to finally encounter a situation where Naruto had to rely on her so heavily. It felt good. For once, she had an opportunity to guide him after all the times he'd helped her, or inspired her. Even beyond that, she found that without the nervousness inspired by her father's assessing gaze, she'd actually enjoyed taking a meal with strangers and getting to know them. It was also refreshing to go an entire meal without slipping up, forgetting what to say, or otherwise embarrassing herself. Perhaps it was because Naruto needed her knowledge to guide them both… but she was pretty sure it was something else.

"The pleasure was all ours," Misato said with an impish grin. Shino's mother was so unlike her husband or son, but Hinata intuited that they actually enjoyed the differences between them. Having been raised under the strict Hyuuga protocols for proper behavior, both in public and in private, it was a startling concept for Hinata to digest. Startling, but strangely attractive nonetheless.

"Agreed," Aburame Shibi added. "You both are welcome in our house at any time."

Hinata, not trusting her voice at the moment, merely bowed deeply. Out of the corner of her eye, she was relieved to see Naruto aping

her, despite the confused look on his face. The declaration by Shino's father was the highest complement that could be paid to a guest, and amounted to an offer of alliance and even temporary sanctuary, if needed.

"That is not necessary," Shibi said, though his tone was not sharp. "Shino's assessment of your nature and characters logically requires this. Even beyond that, if his teammates were not capable, brave, and loyal, our son might not have survived his first C-ranked mission."

"Shino did his part too," Naruto said as he straightened up, scowling.

"Yes, he did." Shibi agreed. "But if you two had not done yours as well, the mission could have ended in failure, or even death. Your success is integral to his success – that is the nature of a team. Even beyond that, there is the matter of the prisoner that you protect us from."

Hinata bit her lip as Naruto froze in place at the mention of the Kyuubi.

"Everyone here is aware of your burden, Uzumaki Naruto, so I am not breaking the Hokage's law," Shino's father continued. "That said- we are guilty of relying on hearsay as to your previous actions and character. That situation has since been corrected," he added, giving Shino a sideways glance, "but I would still like to extend an apology, on behalf of my family and my clan."

Hinata could almost feel the jumble of emotions coming from Naruto as his face went pale, then pink. He ducked his head forward, his eyes having grown suspiciously shiny. "Apologies are not necessary," he said quickly in a thick voice.

"As you say, Uzumaki-san," Shibi replied. "But you will not be slandered without cause within my hearing."

Hinata looked up from Naruto and ended up locking gazes with Misato. The woman's bright green eyes seemed to bore into hers for a moment. Then she gave the pale-eyed girl a slow, deliberate wink —for what, Hinata wasn't sure.

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Naruto was still a bit numb as they made their goodbyes and left the Aburame neighborhood. Objectively, he'd hoped to win over the people of Konoha when he became Hokage… hoped they would acknowledge him and the burden he'd carried for them since the day of his birth. But to have it actually *happen…* was not something he was prepared for.

The Aburame were not the largest or most prestigious of Konoha's shinobi clans. But to have even one family break ranks from the rest and declare him welcome into their home at any time… He didn't need Hinata's whispered explanation as they walked along the moonlit streets of Konoha to know how significant that was.

And he was far too excited to be calmly walking down the street.

With a grin he grabbed Hinata's hand and leaped onto the nearest roof. His sparring partner's reflexes were as fast as his and she managed to time her leap to meet his own. With the moon, it was as bright as noon to their dark-adjusted eyes. With a playful grin, Naruto let go of Hinata's hand and tapped her shoulder with his fingertips. "You're it!" he said as he sprang away.

In an instant, Hinata was pursuing him across the rooftops.

Fortunately, they'd both increased their weights recently, so they were fairly evenly matched as they darted from roof to roof. Given their normal training regimen, they were used to far more physical activity than they'd had that day. Aside from that, Naruto had never had the chance to play games like this before – and playing tag with your own shadow clones was just pathetic.

At one point he landed near an odd-shaped roof cornice that shimmered and melted away to reveal a figure wearing an ANBU mask. "Pursuit training," Naruto said quickly as he leapt away.

"Excuse me ANBU-san!" Naruto smiled as he heard Hinata's voice echo from the roof he'd just vacated.

Their game meandered across the rooftops of Konoha until they cut across a block of buildings usually reserved for visiting officials. As he landed, Naruto was engulfed in a miasma of killing intent more intense than he'd ever felt. Instead of leaping away, he dropped into a crouch and spun, seeking the source of the murderous rage.

There, standing on the roof beam was a smallish red-headed shinobi with a large gourd strapped to his back. Teal-colored eyes, ringed with dark circles, glared at him with frightening intensity. Above one eye was a kanji symbol obscured by hair and shadows. The sash securing the gourd in place held a Hidden Sand symbol that glinted in the moonlight.

Fighting Kazuya to the death wasn't nearly as frightening as having this strange kid just *look* at him. Naruto clenched his fists to keep his hands from shaking. His feet felt rooted in place. If this strange kid attacked, would he even be able to dodge?

Just then, Hinata landed next to him and let out a quiet gasp. Without thinking, Naruto found himself moving, standing in front of his frozen team-mate, facing the terrifying shinobi with a kunai in each hand. He could feel the red chakra pulsing in his coils now, raging like a living thing, wanting out. His eyes, suddenly seeing with incredible clarity, picked out the small wisps of sand circling around the boy's feet. His nose picked up the smell of old blood. Was it coming from the sand or from the gourd? And how was he smelling it from here?

It wasn't until Naruto noticed the faint red glare reflecting back from the dull tiles around him that the boy spoke. "You're like me," he said in a voice as quiet as the grave.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" Naruto asked, his voice coming out calmer than he felt.

"I am Sabaku no Gaara," the boy answered, again in that dry whisper. "I am here to participate in the Chuunin Exam."

Hinata edged to his left. Out of the corner of his eye, Naruto could see her Byakugan activated. He resisted the urge to move between her and the sand shinobi again. But when Gaara's eyes moved toward her, Naruto spoke up to keep the attention focused on him. "Maybe I'll see you in the exam then," he said in a mocking voice.

Gaara nodded, either missing or ignoring the sarcasm. "I didn't know Konoha had created its own weapon. You and I will fight, in this exam. And then I will kill you." Gaara smiled then, and Naruto had to revise his 'most terrifying experience' list again. Those teal-colored eyes held no hint of sanity.

"Maybe, maybe not," Naruto said lightly. "But in the meantime, I need to escort the lady home. Enjoy the moonlight." With that, he turned toward his teammate, making finger signs with his left hand the moment it was concealed by his body.

Hinata nodded and leapt away, Naruto following close behind her. He wasn't comfortable turning his back on this Gaara, who… *what*-ever he was, even if they were fairly far away. But the boy didn't seem ready to fight just yet, so Naruto kept his own tone as casual as possible. It seemed to work because they landed on the next roof unmolested.

"Let's get you home," Naruto said urgently. "Kurenai-sensei was right, with all these strangers in Konoha, this isn't a good idea."

Hinata didn't look happy about it, but she nodded in agreement.

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Kurenai was a little exasperated to hear of her students' late-night encounter with the foreign shinobi. She'd asked them to avoid late-

night training just to prevent such an encounter… but it was also gratifying that they didn't hesitate to reveal their disobedience. But to end up in a life-threatening situation over a *game of tag…*

She looked at them again, taking in the uncomfortable postures, Naruto's scowl, and Hinata's nervous fingers… and suppressed a sigh. Sometimes it was easy to forget that they were still kids in some ways. A genin was mostly an adult, at least in the eyes of the village, but the trappings of childhood were not so easily shed. And in these two cases, she was sure neither of them had experienced much of a childhood in the first place. And a late night game of tag, conducted with sufficient stealth to apparently startle an ANBU, was hardly defiance of her orders. They'd merely had the bad luck to encounter an unusually frightening competitor on that rooftop.

"Thank you for telling me this," Kurenai said. "In the future, you should probably not wander around after dark – especially if there is a chance that this Gaara person may seek you out. I'll see what I can find out about him."

Naruto nodded, but the troubled look on his face persisted. "He said that I was like him," he said in a quiet voice, "and that he didn't know that Konoha had created its own weapon."

Kurenai stared at her student. There were… possibilities… implied in those words, possibilities too awful to speculate about.

"A-ano," Hinata interjected, flinching slightly when they both turned toward her. "N-Naruto, when I looked at him with the Byakugan, there was some gold-colored chakra mixed in with his."

"Like me," Naruto echoed. "He has a demon… like me?"

Kurenai nodded, her mind now racing at the possibilities. She had no idea how powerful it might be, but this was something the Hokage needed to know *immediately.*

"Hardly like you in most respects," Shino objected. "You do not display an excessive amount of bloodlust, nor are you given toward idle threats." He paused. "This Gaara also seems to demonstrate a certain economy with his words that you lack."

Naruto blinked. "So he speaks better than I do? Thanks a lot, Shino." He smiled at his impassive teammate.

But Hinata still appeared troubled. "And you don't see yourself as a weapon, Naruto-kun… but that's what he called himself," she said, her brows stitched with anguish.

"That's right," Naruto agreed, frowning.

"W-what…" Hinata's voice trailed off as she stared into space. She swallowed. "What would it be like, Naruto-kun, if you had no one like us, like Iruka-sensei, like the Hokage-sama. What if everyone hated and feared you, and *no one* accepted you?"

Kurenai's mind, augmented by her studies of the human mind for advanced genjutsu, came to a conclusion first. But she held her tongue to see if the others would figure it out on their own.

Surprisingly, Naruto answered first. "I… I think I'd probably hate them back. Do you think that's what happened to him?"

Hinata nodded slowly.

"However," Shino interjected, "that does not make him less dangerous."

"I agree," Kurenai added. "I would suggest that you avoid him at all costs during the exam. I need to go speak to the Hokage, so you are released from your duties today. I think this constitutes an even stronger reason to avoid being outside for long after dark."

"D-do you think it will be alright to train within our homes?" Hinata asked quickly.

Kurenai nodded. "I think that will be fine. Tomorrow we will go over some things that might help you on the exam. I take it all three of you are still interested in taking it?"

After they nodded, Kurenai dismissed them and made her way to the Hokage's tower at a *rather* quick walk. Anything more would have drawn potentially hostile attention.

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"This kind of sucks," Naruto muttered as they walked toward Moritake's. He'd pressed for ramen, but been outvoted.

"We've eaten at Ichiraku's four times in the past two weeks," Shino observed, with just a hint of tolerant amusement.

"I don't mean where we're going for lunch," Naruto snapped irritably. "I mean us having to cut back our training." It was like Shino didn't think he was capable of worrying about something besides ramen. Wonderful, hot, savory ramen…

"It will not heavily impact my new training regimen," Shino observed. Out of the corner of his eye, Naruto noticed him rolling his shoulders slightly. Didn't Misato say something about weapons training?

"Yeah, but that's just because you can train at home," Naruto countered, rolling his eyes.

"A-ano," Hinata stammered. "C-could we not train at your apartment?" she asked.

Naruto paused as he struggled to absorb the idea. "It's not very big," he objected.

"We can still work on chakra control," Hinata insisted. "Perhaps some light sparring," she continued.

"We won't really have much room to maneuver," Naruto said with an embarrassed catch in his voice. His apartment was nothing to brag

about.

"Sometimes combat occurs in close quarters," Shino countered, "so it might be useful to practice in such a setting. My… new instructor… has me practice my forms in our basement, which is filled with incubation equipment."

Naruto nodded slowly, but was even more convinced by the obvious relief Hinata was displaying. She was actually pretty good at hiding things when she tried, but he was slowly getting better at reading her. He didn't have to be a genius shinobi to realize that she'd rather train than be around her family, so even cramped quarters at his place would be preferable. He'd just have to make sure he cleaned up and didn't leave any dirty underwear on the floor.

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Kurenai sighed as she left the Hokage's office. He'd been highly concerned when she reported Naruto's encounter with the Suna boy, Gaara. But it wasn't like they could summarily dismiss him from the exam… not without a serious explanation. He was the youngest son of the Kazekage, which only complicated things.

Even if Suna was a nominal ally of Konoha, their entering a demon-host, especially one as bloodthirsty as this Gaara seemed to be, would be like dumping a piranha in a goldfish bowl. But if they objected to his presence, they'd have to explain how they knew… and Gaara's words only made sense if one knew that Naruto was a Jinchuuriki as well.

Barring one without barring both of them would be seen as the worst kind of favoritism, and the Hokage was not willing to reveal Naruto's secret to the leaders of the other delegations. There were already rumors of the shadowy Akatsuki organization taking an interest in Konoha, and there was nothing to be gained by adding fuel to that fire.

But they would be on their guard at least. Team Eight had fulfilled its primary function as a recon team – finding out important information

and reporting it to the Hokage. Using that information correctly was their leader's responsibility. She only hoped he made the right decision.

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The day of the exam dawned with typical Konoha weather, bright sunshine and a hint of coolness on the breeze… weather that made Naruto want to stay outside all day and half the night. He met Shino and Hinata at their training ground in a frame of mind that was not really conducive to taking a long test. He'd been bouncing on the balls of his feet, bursting with nervous tension since he left his apartment.

This was it, really, the first step on his path to becoming Hokage and *making* everyone acknowledge him. How could he *possibly* remain calm? Everything was changing, even his morning training sessions with Gai, Lee, and Hinata. The last couple of days, instead of pounding each other into the dirt, they did light warm-ups, advanced forms, and attended an informal seminar on battlefield tactics. The latter showed Naruto something he was only beginning to understand.

Maito Gai was a lot smarter than his wardrobe or haircut suggested.

Outside of his… enthusiasms… the jonin could be just as ruthless as a mission called for. And since he focused on taijutsu, he'd given a lot of thought on how to handle multiple opponents, how to deal with long-range attacks, and how to neutralize an enemy's advantages.

Naruto was a little uncomfortable with the thought that Gai-sensei might be helping them beat his own team, if the chuunin examination included head-to-head competition. He knew that Tenten was getting some special genjutsu training from Kurenai, but he still realized that Gai was going far beyond the original bargain.

It wasn't until the end of the last session that Gai became very serious, and Naruto came to understand his reasoning.

"Tomorrow you will be entering the chuunin examination," he said as they sprawled on the grass after performing what he called 'simple cool-down exercises'—which most people would probably consider to be an entire workout on their own. "While you three will be better prepared than many genin, and your Power of Youth will shine very brightly for all to see…" Gai stopped and visibly restrained himself from going off on that all-too-familiar tangent. "Keep in mind that the examination itself can be very dangerous. Do not underestimate your opponents, but more importantly, do not forget who your friends are." He paused, seeming to take in their curious looks.

"Even though the exam is being held here in Konoha, there will be many participants from other villages. Some of them may not hold very honorable intentions, and may seek to harm or kill another competitor to give them an edge. Although not encouraged, this is not strictly against the rules the Hidden Villages all agreed to." Gai drew those incredibly thick eyebrows down into a fair approximation of a frown. "Please watch out for your fellow shinobi during the exam. Even the strongest rivalry should be put away when facing shinobi from another village. That is one of the Leaf's greatest strengths… if we forget that, then we have truly turned our backs on the Power of Youth."

That's when it really struck Naruto… Gai wanted them *all* to pass, everyone from Konoha. And if they helped each other as he asked, then that would improve the chances for Neji, Tenten, and Lee as well. Naruto, stunned by this unexpected complexity, just nodded vigorously. Gai gave him one of those blinding smiles that made Naruto want to go buy toothpaste.

Still, such sobering thoughts couldn't compete with Naruto's competitive nature, so he was wound as tight as a spring when he met his teammates.

Of course, if Shino had any concerns about the exam, he wasn't showing any of it. Sometimes the Aburame boy's calm deliberation was more irritating than the entire Konohamaru Corps on a sugar high. For an instant, Naruto wondered if he realized that and just did

it on purpose… No, not possible, he decided as he turned toward Hinata, who'd just entered the clearing as well.

For once, she was able to meet his eyes without looking away. She was standing a little straighter than usual as well. Naruto softly exhaled the breath he didn't know he'd been holding. She was so calm and centered that he couldn't help but absorb some of that himself. For some reason, just her presence seemed to relieve his nervous agitation. The chakra control exercises she'd led him through definitely benefited from that. Even that pesky red chakra seemed to behave itself better under her watchful eye.

Naruto had lost count of how many times he'd cast the water-summoning jutsu into his sink… but bit by bit his control had improved. He was able to further reduce the amount of chakra he molded into the technique, while reducing the amount of time it took to complete the seals.

Of course, his progress was nowhere near even. The first time he'd made a breakthrough, his elation caused the jutsu to spiral out of control, spraying water across his small kitchen. Interestingly enough, when this happened Hinata threw up her hands in reflex and the spray of water seemed to split and mostly flow *around* her instead of soaking her jacket.

"Are we ready to go?" Hinata asked softly, jolting Naruto out of his reverie. He nodded, hoping he hadn't been staring at her or something weird. He stayed quiet as they walked toward their destination. Kurenai-sensei said that all the jonin had been drafted to help with the exam, but that she hoped to see them in the later stages.

As they entered the building where the exam was being held, Naruto felt uncomfortable, almost like someone was watching him. His suspicions were borne out as they climbed the stairs and Hinata whispered "genjutsu" in a voice that barely carried as far as her teammates' ears.

As they approached Room 301, or what looked like it anyway, there was a crowd of younger shinobi gathered outside the door. Two rough looking older genin had just finished knocking Lee and Tenten back as Team 7 objected.

"We're doing you kids a favor, keeping you out," one of the older genin said. "None of you look like you can handle us, let alone a test that makes some people forever give up being a shinobi – or just kills them."

"That's a sound argument," Sasuke said in a challenging voice, "but I will pass. And undo this field you've created using an illusionary technique. I want to go to the third floor."

Naruto noted the small smile on Tenten's lips as they walked up to the altercation. Evidently she'd spotted it as well. He began concentrating chakra in his center. Something was a little fishy about those genin.

Sasuke and the unnamed genin started to exchange kicks when Lee appeared between them in a flash of green, grabbing their legs while the kicks were still chambered. For a stunned moment, both Sasuke and the genin were held in place until Lee released their legs and they had to back off to retain their balance.

Naruto released the chakra pulse while everyone's attention was focused on the aborted fight. He frowned. He'd barely pushed *anything* into it, and the pulse still washed across the hallway and probably enveloped the whole building.

Still, it did what it was supposed to do. The two suspicious genin were revealed as adult chuunin in the grey uniforms of examination proctors.

Neji, who was starting to rebuke Lee for showing off, turned and glared at Naruto before turning back to his teammate. Naruto gave him a jaunty wave, guessing he'd figured out where the pulse had come from. Too bad his Byakugan hadn't been on so it could have

blinded him for a bit. Hinata's cousin was way too arrogant for his own good.

"Evidently the exam actually began the moment we entered the building," Shino observed.

"And we should expect other parts to not be as they seem," Hinata added.

Naruto grunted and nodded, but his attention was more focused on Rock Lee. His cheeks were bright red as he asked Sakura out on a date. She turned him down, of course, glancing sidelong at Sasuke as if to see whether he was jealous of the attention paid to her. Naruto noted with a sinking stomach that it only seemed to fire up Lee's determination.

He saw Lee speak briefly with his teammates as the crowd split up, now ignoring the amused chuunin, one of which was openly smirking at Naruto. When Lee followed after Team 7, Naruto knew he had to do something. "I'll meet you on the third floor," he said quickly as he took off after Lee.

Fortunately he managed to catch his friend right after he challenged Sasuke to a fight. "Excuse us," he said as he dragged Lee around the corner and down the hall out of sight of Team 7.

"Naruto!" Lee said, struggling to remove his elbow from Naruto's grasp. "Why are you interfering…?"

"Lee! Have you forgotten what Gai-sensei said?" Naruto snapped. Those were words he never thought he'd say.

Lee flinched like he had been struck a heavy blow.

"The test has begun," Naruto said quietly. "They are still Konoha shinobi, even if Sasuke is a jerk. We don't fight allies. Not in this kind of situation."

Lee looked down. Naruto thought he looked unusually subdued. "After the exam, I will run two hundred-"

"Lee," Naruto said quickly, "why did you want to fight Sasuke so badly?"

Lee didn't say anything, but let out a heartbroken sigh.

Naruto massaged his forehead with his free hand. Sakura. He wanted to impress Sakura.

"Lee, we're friends, right?"

"Friends and eternal rivals, like Gai-sensei and that terribly cool and hip Kakashi!"

"Er, I thought Neji was your rival."

"He is too cold, Naruto-san. I want a rival that burns with the Fires of Youth as hotly as I do!"

"Ah. Right. Okay, well, even as a rival. Well.. you know, Lee, some things transcend rivalry."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean being a guy, Lee. We're both guys, right?"

"Yosh!"

"Right. So, as one guy to another, I have to warn you about Sakura. I used to like her… I used to like her a lot – before I got to know her. Sakura isn't as nice as she seems. She only likes one person and she doesn't really give a damn about anyone else. I don't want to see you waste your time on her like I did. She just isn't worth it."

"Oh, Naruto, you sound so bitter. Surely the Power of Youth has not left you forlorn?"

"One of these days that stuff's going to make sense to me, and then I'll know I'm in trouble. Look Lee, as your friend, as your rival, I'd rather see you pursue someone nicer than that. Take my advice or not, but if you don't you'll come to regret it."

"I will think about what you have said, Naruto-san, but I find it troubling. She is so beautiful, I just…"

"I know, me too."

Lee looked down at his elbow and Naruto released it with a sheepish grin. "We better get going before our teams kill us for making them late," the short-statured blond said.

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Neither shinobi noticed the pink-haired girl leaning against the wall around the corner from where they'd held their discussion. Her bright green eyes were clouded over and her face held an expression of chagrin. Even her inner self was decidedly subdued. Neither boy had said anything that Inner Sakura could really get angry about.

*Naruto* thought she was beautiful, but wasn't very nice. And he was concerned that if Rock Lee pursued her, then he would be hurt as well. This coming from the boy who'd always pestered her for dates while they were at the academy. But that had stopped the day they were assigned to their teams. Belatedly, she began to wonder if she'd hurt him with her constant rejections.

It wasn't all her fault though. It's not like she was obligated to go out with him just because he asked. And she didn't want to spoil her chances with Sasuke-kun…

Unbidden, memories of some of her more… forceful… rejections came to mind, burning away a lot of her self-justifications.

"I'm not a very nice person," she whispered to herself. Her voice seemed unnaturally loud in the empty hallway.

---

After taking a 'short-cut' that wasn't, Naruto and Lee caught up to their respective teams right outside the examination room. Surprisingly, Kurenai-sensei and Gai-sensei were there as well.

"I'm glad you decided to join us," the red-eyed jonin said in a slightly sarcastic manner.

"S-sorry," Naruto said. "I needed to talk to Lee about something."

Kurenai raised an eyebrow. "I hope it was important, because you two have kept both teams waiting."

Naruto glanced at Lee out of the corner of his eye. The green-clad genin's eyes were locked onto his teacher, who was standing slightly behind Kurenai, giving them a discrete thumbs-up. "It kind of was," he said slowly, hoping Kurenai didn't immediately press him for details. She'd seemed a little extra irritable lately.

"It better, since your teammates cannot enter without you," she replied dryly.

"What if not all of us wished to enter the exam?" Shino asked.

"Genin can only enter the exam as an entire team," Kurenai clarified.

"But then why did you tell us…" Naruto started to ask, but his voice trailed off as he put the pieces together. "You wanted to make sure all three of us really wanted to test." It wasn't a question.

Kurenai nodded, smiling slightly. "Very good, Naruto," she congratulated him. His sensei didn't go into wild histrionics like Gai, but her simple words of approval warmed Naruto, almost making him blush.

Team Eight stood politely aside while Gai ushered his team into the exam room. Naruto made a point of ignoring Hyuuga Neji and the cold glares he shot at them. He didn't know if it was Hinata, or if the boy somehow held him responsible for Lee's drunken rampage.

Naruto was completely innocent of that fiasco. However, he had to admit that if he'd known Lee would beat the snot out of the arrogant Hyuuga when liquored up, he'd have made sure it happened.

Frequently.

"I want you three to be careful in there," Kurenai said in a voice little more than a whisper. "For political reasons, we can't exclude this Gaara person from the exam. So I want you three to avoid him at all costs, is that understood?"

Naruto nodded along with the rest, but privately he wasn't sure Gaara would cooperate. The odd boy seemed almost indecently focused on Naruto after he realized Naruto's secret.

"Then good luck," she whispered as she opened the door for them.

Objectively, Naruto realized that there would be a lot of participants in the chuunin exam. Subjectively, he wasn't completely prepared to have almost a hundred pairs of unfriendly eyes lock onto him the moment he stepped into the testing room.

Naruto found his feet moving without thought, placing himself between his team and the potential hostiles, while his fists clenched and his face twisted into a ferocious scowl. The closest genin immediately backed up a couple of steps and Naruto wondered if they were jockeying for room in which to attack. "Don't even *think* about it!" he snapped, a muscle along his jaw jumping with nervous tension.

"Oi! Naruto! Stop making a scene, it's far too troublesome…" a bored-sounding voice snapped him out of his focus.

Naruto eased back out of the combat stance he'd dropped into and turned toward the familiar-sounding voice. Clumped together beside the door were the members of Team Seven, Team Ten, and Team Gai - who'd just preceded them into the room. Shikamaru was leaning against the wall while Choji stood next to him working on a

bag of chips. Ino was talking to Sakura – and they weren't arguing for once. In fact, Sakura seemed oddly subdued. On the other hand, Kiba was 'talking' to Akamaru, who seemed oddly agitated. Sasuke and Neji were both giving him strange looks as well. Tenten seemed to be whispering a question to Neji, but wasn't getting an answer. At least Lee seemed somewhat normal – normal for him anyway – and wasn't visibly pursuing Sakura, to Naruto's relief.

Cautiously, Team Eight went to stand with the other rookies. Technically Team Gai wasn't a rookie squad, but they were only a year older.

"The older genin seem to resent our presence," Shino observed.

"Well, duh," Kiba said, placing a rather nervous-looking dog back on top of his hood. "If you had to wait three or four years before your sensei let you take the chuunin exam, people like us make you look bad."

Shino paused, seeming to stare at the Inuzuka boy. Naruto wondered if his teammate was becoming more expressive, or if he was just learning to read him better. "That is completely irrational," Shino finally said in an annoyed tone. Maybe he was just becoming more irritable.

Kiba just shrugged. "You tell them that. We'll give you an honorable burial," he said with a tight grin.

"Not a chance," Naruto snapped, his former anger returning. No wonder he was jumpy with all the ill-concealed hostility in the room. Anyone laying a hand on his team better be prepared to have it ripped off.

"A-ano," Hinata said hesitantly. "I t-think he was just kidding."

"It's a miracle," Kiba said with wide eyes and a taunting grin. "She talks!"

That crack got him a glare from Shino, which he ignored, and a blush from Hinata, which widened his grin. What it got from Naruto was a narrowing of his eyes and a low growl that seem to rumble from his chest of its own accord. Akamaru suddenly let out a low whine and made a series of sharp, high-pitched barks. Kiba's eyes widened slightly and then he made a face. "It was just a joke," he said with disgust, "get a grip."

"Your alleged sense of humor leaves much to be desired," Shino said in a dry tone.

"Yeah, yeah," Kiba said dismissively, waving a hand as he turned and began bothering Sasuke.

"Hey, you guys," an unfamiliar voice called out. "You should quiet down a little." Naruto turned along with the rest to see a silver-haired genin approach. Despite his hair, he only appeared to be a few years older. "So you're the rookies that just graduated from the academy, correct?"

No one answered him immediately, but he continued. "You're all fooling around… this isn't a field trip."

His dismissive tone seemed to irk several of them, but Yamanaka Ino was quickest to reply. "Who are you to tell us that?" she demanded.

"I am Yakushi Kabuto," the young man answered, "and if you look around you'll see that everyone is on edge. I don't want to see you get singled out. I guess you can't help it, being rookies and not knowing anything. It reminds me of how I was when I first took the exam."

"Kabuto-san?" Sakura asked hesitantly. "Is this your second time taking the exam?"

"No," he answered. "My seventh."

"Does that mean you know a lot about the exam?" she asked with a hopeful smile.

"Yes, I suppose it does," Kabuto said with an embarrassed grin.

"More like he knows how to fail the exam," Shikamaru observed in a bored tone. "If the exam is that difficult, it's going to be even more troublesome."

Kabuto seemed a little nonplussed about the abrupt dismissal, so he upped the ante. "Maybe I should give you kids some information then, with these recognition cards."

Naruto tensed as Kabuto reached into his kunai pouch, but he only pulled out some orange and black cards.

"These have information I burned into them using my chakra," he said. "I've collected information on this exam for the last four years on these two hundred cards. They appear blank, and cannot be read without my chakra." He knelt down and began to turn one on the floor with an extended finger. After a moment, there was a soft pop and a cloud of smoke blew away from the card to reveal a map of the region. On the legend was a tally of the genin entered by each country participating in the exam.

As Kabuto began to hold forth on the purpose of the chuunin exams and how they help maintain the balance of power, Naruto was thinking. Why was this guy being so helpful? Was he a friend of one of their sensei's? When he tried to look 'underneath the underneath' it made him a little uneasy. Others might accept a complete stranger helping them out of the goodness of his heart, but Naruto knew that happened pretty seldom – even in Konoha, which Kurenai said was often denigrated by other hidden villages for being 'too soft'.

Naruto was wondering what, if anything, he should do about his half-formed suspicions when Sasuke spoke up for the first time. "Are there any cards that have detailed personal information?"

Kabuto admitted that they did, and Sasuke asked to see information on Rock Lee and Gaara, earning him a quick look from Naruto. It was a little rude to ask for information on Lee right in front of him, but Naruto wondered how Sasuke even knew Gaara's name. Had he run into the boy as well? Or had his jonin warned him to stay away from the Suna genin at all costs? Naruto doubted Kurenai would have kept information to herself if it could potentially save the life of an ally… and Naruto had a feeling that anyone going after Sabaku no Gaara unprepared was risking everything.

Naruto wondered if he should add his own warning. But how could he reveal what he knew of Gaara without exposing himself? And would the arrogant Uchiha even believe him?

Thankfully, the sketchy information that Kabuto had regarding Gaara was enough to make anyone cautious. Completing a B-ranked mission as a genin was almost unheard of, going by Kabuto's expression. The total lack of information regarding the foreign shinobi's capabilities was also an effective warning. Concealed abilities were almost always more dangerous than known ones.

And never having been injured on a mission was downright scary.

To top things off on the anxiety scale, Kabuto then went into a big explanation of how five other villages sent their best genin to compete in this chuunin exam. To compete against a bunch of genin who'd only left the academy a few months ago.

Out of the corner of his eye, Naruto saw Hinata looking down. Even Rock Lee looked a little hesitant. Oh no, this would not do.

"Good!" Naruto said in a loud voice, making everyone around him jump. "If this was easy, then making chuunin would mean *nothing* . Strong opponents mean we get to really show what we can do! Right, Hinata?" He added the last while gently elbowing his teammate.

Hinata's head shot up. "Hai!" she chirped, her cheeks already coloring.

Naruto gave her a warm smile that seemed to fluster her even worse and then turned to his other teammate. "Right Shino?"

Shino adjusted his glasses calmly, but Naruto thought he could detect a quiet buzzing coming from the Aburame boy. With his arm raised, Naruto noticed that the sleeves of his jacket were cut wider than normal. He had a strong suspicion there was more than just arm in there. "That is correct, Naruto," Shino said, his voice a bit louder than usual.

"Good!" Naruto said. He then turned toward the nearest older genin, who, although they wore Konoha hitai-ite, seemed just as hostile as the foreign shinobi. "My name is Uzumaki Naruto, future Hokage of Konoha, and if you have a problem with me being here, form a line!" he roared.

The rest of the Rookie Nine and Team Gai were all staring at him incredulously. Ino asked him what the hell he thought he was doing, but he tuned them all out. His attention was on two things. The first was the small smile of approval Hinata gave him. The second was the pair of genin with Hidden Sound hitai-ite making their way toward the group of Konoha-nin at high speed.

The two Sound males appeared to be setting up a combo attack on Kabuto. Even if the older genin was a little patronizing, he was still a Konoha shinobi. As the skinny guy leapt over the crowd and sent a pair of throwing kunai at the silver-haired genin, Naruto was already in motion.

Grabbing a thrown kunai out of the air was usually an iffy proposition, given how much of it was sharp and how little of it was safe to grab. But if he just deflected them, they were likely to hit one of the foreign genin and undoubtedly spark a general brawl. Fortunately, Naruto's timing was just right and he was able to grab the handles of the kunai as his path crossed theirs. One sharp edge

dug into the palm of his fingerless gloves, but didn't penetrate. Of course, the quick motion of his arms made his body begin tumbling as it continued to fly toward the ceiling. With a wrenching twist, Naruto managed to get his feet to hit the ceiling first, and charged with chakra they held him there upside down.

The bulky Sound genin was still heading toward Kabuto, but without the thrown kunai backing his target up into the wall, the Sound genin had to alter his path to cut through the Konoha rookies. His arm was drawn back for a haymaker swing at the silver-haired genin when Shino stepped into the arc, his own forearm held vertical, the heel of his hand turned outward. The genin's arm's clashed with an audible clang, but surprisingly, Shino did not move an inch. The sound genin's one visible eye glared at Shino, but the Aburame genius seemed completely unaffected.

"This is unseemly," Shino said, as if he were discussing Naruto's table manners at Ichiraku's.

The sound genin's eye narrowed and his other hand moved under his cloak.

"Please stop," Hinata said softly as she appeared by Shino's side, her palm extended, glowing with chakra, less than an inch from the bandages that covered most of the sound genin's face.

The bulky genin froze in place, and then slowly straightened. Looking down from the ceiling, Naruto also saw Sasuke palm a pair of kunai, Kiba edging around for a better angle, Neji holding Lee back from the fight, and Shikamaru, of all people, standing there with a look of focused concentration on his face. The shadows cast by the overhead lights seemed to be pooled around the Nara boy's feet.

The skinny sound genin landed next to his comrade. "Hidden Sound is *not* a minor village. And we don't need to all gang up on someone to stop them, either," he spat, glaring at the rookies.

Naruto released the chakra in his feet and jumped down from the ceiling behind the sound genin. To their credit, neither of them jumped at the sudden noise. With a smile he casually handed the kunai back to their owner, who was visibly seething.

"You speak of our greatest strength as a weakness," Shino said urbanely. "I find myself pitying you."

"And if either of you want a piece of me, the offer is still open," Naruto said in a low voice. The lack of intensive physical training the last few days had left him fidgety and just a little irritable too.

Just then there was a loud explosion and smoke billowed from the front of the examination room. "Quiet down you punks!" a rough voice bellowed.

When the smoke dissipated Naruto saw a tall scar-faced man sporting a Konoha hitai-ite and a black trenchcoat. Flanking him was a squad of chuunin dressed in proctor's uniforms, including the two clowns he'd uncovered earlier.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," the man, who appeared to be a special jonin of some sort, continued in a smoother voice. "I am the examiner of the first test of the Chuunin Selection Exam, Morino Ibiki."

Author's notes:

I'd like to thank both the genius that is Runsamok and the incredible and decidedly insane Bibliophile20 for their absolutely wonderful beta work. They made me add this grin,

Before you ask, the 'preliminary exams' in canon didn't happen because Iruka wasn't at the meeting to protest the Rookie Nine being entered in the chuunin exam.

And a trio of affirmatives today…

Yes, I'm back. Some of this was surprisingly hard to put together, and real life (which is highly overrated) wasn't very cooperative at all. Yes things are a little different than the canon scenes, but I'm sure if you look at everything you will realize why.

Yes, the title of this chapter is an intentional pun. "My Dinner with Andre" was a movie released back in 1981.

And yes, I'm including the Team 8 Omake winners from the contest on my blog. (Link is in my profile.)

The winner is Wolfgang Beulen, who wrote a scene that seemed to match the narrative tone of Team 8 the best.

Among the shinobi of Konoha, most tended to have rather clear and defined images of their fellow ninja, sometimes even to the point were a person was defined by the very same picture people had of her, in lieu of what she really was like. It was so common, in fact, that the few ninja who knew better could not help but to shake their heads and ask themselves what had become of 'looking underneath the underneath'. Especially when there were more than just a few cases, with some of them being of village-wide renown.

Uzumaki Naruto, of course, was a prime example, with the image of a goofy, orange-clad prankster so deeply ingrained in people's minds that few could even start to imagine him as a solemn and capable ninja. The hyperactive Mitarashi Anko was another surprise, when people heard about her interest in tea ceremonies and tried to envision her wearing a traditional kimono and partaking in such a formal and ritualistic event.

Others were of far less renown, like Inuzuka Tsume. With her feral look caused by her facial tattoos, shaggy hair, and her pronounced canines, it was easy to envision her on a battlefield, tearing some enemy limb from limb with her dog companion Kuromaru at her side. Some people even went as far as picturing her how she tore out someone's throat with her bare teeth.

The thought of her as a loving mother and housewife seemed pretty ridiculous in comparison. Therefore, more than just a few people would have stopped dead in their tracks and make a double-take at the sight of the Inuzuka woman wearing a green apron in front her kitchen's hearth and cooking a meal. Two meals, in fact; one for her son, and another one for Akamaru.

Originally, she had intended this as a small celebration of her son's first C-rank mission's completion. And while this hadn't exactly changed, it now had the added purpose of lifting Kiba's spirits a bit, and distracting him from the mission's sad outcome.

"How much longer, mom?"

"Just a few minutes. And the more you ask, the longer it'll be," she replied. As far as it seemed, her distraction was working. After recounting his tale of the mission, Kiba was now fully concentrated on the fact that his mother was preparing the favorite foods of both him and Akamaru and played impatiently with his chopsticks.

In the meanwhile, the small white dog was still busy relaying his own point of view on the events to Kuromaru, who interjected at several points with questions or comments of his own. The result was a conversation that consisted of innumerable low barks, yips, growls, and similar sounds only an Inuzuka would be able to decipher. Right now, though, Kiba was too preoccupied with his meal, and Tsume only listened halfheartedly as she checked the pot with Akamaru's food.

"How's your team coming along after this?"

"Sasuke's trying to act like a cold and indifferent jerk," Kiba began and added a muttered 'as always' under his breath before he continued. "But I can tell that it's bothering him. Sakura said that he expects a lot from himself, so he's probably both angry and disappointed that it didn't went very well.

"And Sakura... well, she's very down as well. Even more than Sasuke, in fact."

"How come?" Although she was busy preparing the meal, her question was proof that she still paid attention to her son.

He paused to scratch his cheek while thinking of an answer. In the background, he could hear Akamaru's and Kuromaru's chatter, without really listening to them.

"I think she's pretty disappointed in herself, even more so then Sasuke. Most of the time, she couldn't do much beside covering Tazuna-san. Sasuke, Kakashi-sensei and I handled the fighting against the enemy ninja. I guess she might've felt... well, useless.. And maybe she's disappointed in Sasuke as well. Or rather, in the fact that he didn't live up to the image she had of him." He shrugged.

"She tries to cover her worries by behaving as violent and aggressive as usual, though. She's not unlike sis in that manner. Don't tell her I said that, though..."

"Tell what to whom?"

Upon hearing the voice of his very own sister as she entered the room, Kiba shot a pleading glance towards his mother. Tsume just gave him a smile. "Nothing. Just that both you and Sakura are violent and aggressive."

Chuckling to herself she returned her attention toward the food she prepared and listened to the squabble between her two children that ensued. It ended soon enough, as this kind of fight often did, and she finally got the opportunity to put the meal on the table. She noticed that Akamaru was still busy telling his story to Kuromaru, though he seemed to slowly reach the end.

"It seems this year's got some strong and interesting pups," Kuromaru mentioned in the human tongue as soon as Akamaru had finished his story. Turning towards his partner, he was met with a

questioning look. "Kiba and his pack, now, and the pack we met on the hunt a few days ago," he elaborated in response.

Tsume spent a few moments searching through her memory before her eyes lit up in understanding. "Ah, you mean Kurenai's team."

Kiba stopped in his meal to throw his mother a questioning look. "Naruto, Hinata, 'n Shino? I met them on the way back. What's with them?"

"They were on a border patrol mission just a few days ago and we ran into them during a rescue mission. Didn't they tell you?" She asked with her eyebrows raised in surprise. From what she had heard about them from Kiba's school stories, she would have expected for Naruto to brag about the events, at least. Shrugging slightly, she began to fill in Kiba on what happened.

"Three missing-nin of B- to A-rank kidnapped two inhabitants of our village and escaped toward the border that Kurenai's team patrolled. They intercepted the missing-nin and defeated them shortly before the rescue team that I was a part of arrived. I don't know the details, but Naruto killed at least one of them."

"Naruto killed one of them?" Kiba asked in disbelief with such a funny face that Tsume couldn't help but let out a bark of laughter that was joined by her daughter.

"I wouldn't believe it, myself, if Kuromaru hadn't told me," Hana supported her mother's claim, although her attention was more focused on Akamaru. The exchange between her mother and little brother didn't interest her too much, since she already had heard the story from her mother a couple of days earlier. Instead she beckoned the white dog to come to her and bribed him with a few pieces of meat from her food to tell her about the mission he and Kiba just had returned from. Although he had his very own meal, the prospect of some extra food made him happy to comply.

"He smelt of fresh blood," Kuromaru explained in the meantime to Kiba. As he opened his mouth, probably for some sort of protest, the canine interjected. "Human blood." Apparently, the black dog wasn't too pleased with the fact that Kiba wanted to doubt either his nose, or his statement.

"I guess you'll have to ask them yourself, if you want the whole story. We had to return to Konoha immediately after retrieving the two kidnappees from Kurenai's team. I hadn't even the time to taste out the cooking of the Hyuuga girl." The last sentence Tsume muttered more to herself than to her son. Damn that Hiashi. Who would've been hurt if they had stayed and rested for a night, or a few hours at least? Hinata had seemed like she did her very best to prepare a good meal for them, and from the appetizing look and smell it had had, she had done a damn good job at it. Somehow, it seemed like Hiashi went out of his way to make his daughter feel miserable, which was something Tsume couldn't even begin to wrap her head around.

Meanwhile, Kiba stared down at his meal with a mixture of emotions. Disbelief and anger were the prevalent ones, with a good deal of confusion thrown in as well. He and Sasuke had fought and bled and cursed together just to bring down a single enemy nin, whereas Naruto managed not only to defeat one as well, but completely on his own if what Kuromaru had told him was true. That just couldn't be right; after all Naruto hat been a complete looser at the academy.

As the moments passed, however, Kiba noted something entirely different; the fact that the Naruto now seemed different from the one he remembered from the Academy. When he met him today, he didn't brag about it like he should have without hesitation. And if he remembered the clash at the ramen bar correctly, Naruto didn't shout or scream at that time, either, and just left instead. Kiba wasn't sure what to make of all this, besides asking himself the obvious question 'How much did you change exactly, Naruto?'

And the runner up is Alle, who offered an intriguing look into the life of an Inuzuka…

Inuzuka Kiba couldn't help a relieved smile as the delicious smells of meat stew and fresh leather--home--hit his nostrils. Comfortably snuggled into what was left of Kiba's jacket, Akamaru yowled sleepily, keeping his eyes closed. Kiba shared his companion's sentiment. He felt thrashed, not that he'd ever admit it. He envisioned a warm meal, and then a warmer bed, and he couldn't decide whether he was more hungry or tired.

Kiba approached the cottage from the direction of the wind, letting it announce his arrival. He knew, from a previous unfortunate experience involving night-time, a bet, and sake, that there was no way to creep past his family's noses and ears. Even if he could fool his sisters and the dogs, which in itself was no small feat, his mother or father would always know. Passing the last tree, he brushed his shoulder against it, leaving his mark while taking in his family's. His mother was home, the tree's scents told him; his sisters were home earlier that morning. His father's trace was fainter than he remembered: still away, probably in the latest long range mission with his hunter-nin uncles.

As he entered the dining room, his gaze was drawn to the steaming bowl on the table, then to the left, where his mother Inuzuka Tsume was putting the finishing touches on a familiar-looking, brand new piece of leatherwork. A smaller bowl was on the floor under his chair, and immediately Akamaru's head popped up from Kiba's collar and he struggled to break free. They both sat down before their meal.

"Welcome back, pup", Tsume said, as she embraced him from behind. Kiba grunted gratefully, engrossed in the wonderful waft coming from the soup. Tsume smiled and nudged his back, letting him know that he should tuck in. For the few seconds it took the pair to devour dinner, the room was silent. Then Tsume refilled their plates and sat down as well. "How did it go?"

Kiba mumbled "Fine." and paused between mouthfuls, looking back at the mission to find something he should say to quickly sum it up. For some reason, the image of his bed kept popping up in his mind. When he found something suitably impressive, he started gesturing

and talking: "Akamaru was amazing! You should have seen it... When a missing-nin was distracted he chomped on his leg, and kept him still so Sasuke-chibi and I could nail him good!"

Tsume raised an eyebrow, saying nothing. The senbon holes, and the smells of blood from Kiba's ruined clothes, still present even after his washing them, told of a brutal fight. There was her son's blood, far too much of it for her comfort, and she smelled his teammates, and Akamaru and someone else as well. At that time she wasn't feeling particularly impressed with Kakashi's judgment. She reached down and lifted Akamaru up, closely examining his bruised body. "Good boy", she simply said, then she touched his muzzle with her nose and gave a good lick at his collar. Akamaru panted in adoration at what amounted to highest praise, then shot towards the kennel, eager to show off the pack leader's scent to his brothers and sisters. "I feel neglected now," Kiba joked, pouting and Tsume smirked at him. "See if that jacket fits you then", she said, pointing at her handiwork from before. Kiba couldn't suppress a grin as he passed his hand over the perfect fur. "Thanks, mum. I'll try to make this one last longer."

Tsume considered letting her son rest. He seemed oddly subdued, which spoke of exhaustion, certainly, but what if there was something more? She took in his appearance, and made a decision. "Tell me everything."

Kiba sighed.

As he told her the full story, properly embellishing his own contribution, Kiba could detect his mother's alternating tension and relief, just as he knew she would sense his own elation and excitement. There were very little secrets in the Inuzuka clan. When both you and your family could easily smell strong emotions such as anger and fear and embarrassment, being anything less than straightforward was just futile. Which suited Kiba's character just fine, thank you very much, and in fact had had a big part in forming such character in the first place.

"...and then we got back," Kiba concluded. Tsume got up and absently refilled his bowl a third time. Her son looked at her expression and some of it suddenly made sense. "Is Kakashi-sensei in trouble?" he asked. She laughed and said: "We'll see", which Kiba correctly interpreted as a resounding 'yes'. Then Tsume got serious and asked, "When you found out the Leaf had been tricked into accepting the mission, you were given the choice to return. Why didn't you?"

Kiba thought about what to say. The largest part of it, he knew, was that Inuzuka Kiba does not turn back from danger, especially not when his two teammates jump into the thick of it without hesitation. Such a revelation, he suspected, wouldn't go down well with his mother. But as he pondered more, he discovered another truth that he'd always known, just never recognized. And it did sound loads better. "That village that lied to us... They really needed our help, mum."

Tsume didn't look at him then, but he didn't need her to. Just seeing her shoulders relax, Kiba immediately knew he had said just the right thing, and could imagine her lips had that light smile she made when she was either happy or proud, or both. And he thought: 'Off the hook! Go me! Bed, here I come!'

It wasn't to be. Still looking away, Tsume said, "Kiba... What does your father tell you, is the best thing about the Inuzuka clan?"

Kiba grinned. "That we can smell when a girl is in-Ow! MUM!"

Tsume put the kettle back in the cupboard. "The other thing."

Kiba felt the growing lump on his head, grumbling. "Should've specified. It's... It's that every Inuzuka knows his place in the pack." He cleared his throat and tried imitating his father's gruff voice. "It's not your nose, cub, but patience that is the key to tracking. The most powerful combat technique in the world is the wait-until-your-opponent-is-asleep jutsu. And never, ever forget your place in the pack."

Tsume nodded. "Glad you listened to that. Go on." She kept looking at him, and when Kiba didn't add anything and just stared dumbly, she sighed.

Kiba was trying his best to look thoughtful, but this was quickly turning into the kind of girly conversation that normally had him running for his life. However, he was also well aware of the fact that Inuzuka Tsume would not be deterred by anything, much less her son's utter lack of interest. He had to show an effort before his eventual escape.

"Let me tell you something", Tsume said eventually. "While you were on your mission, three missing-nins came to our village and kidnapped a Hyuuga child and the Hokage's grandson. I took Kuromaru with me and we lead the pursuit. The tracks showed they were running for the border, probably would've made it across before we got them, but they were intercepted by a few of your classmates. It was Kurenai Yuuhi's team."

Tsume knew she had her son's attention then. "Aburame, Hyuuga... and Uzumaki?" he asked. She nodded, and Kiba scoffed. "Well that's probably why they seemed so down when I saw them, earlier today. They must've gotten their asses kicked pretty bad."

Tsume arched her eyebrow. "Actually, when we arrived, the hostages had already been rescued and all missing-nins were dead. And those three guys weren't exactly pushovers either. From what I gathered, the Aburame and Hyuuga kids were in trouble early in the fight. The last enemy was killed by Kurenai after Uzumaki had dispatched the first two."

Before his mission in Water Country, Kiba would have protested loudly by this time, that he knew how Uzumaki Naruto was a next to useless ninja, and the only jutsu he'd mastered, only made things worse by creating even more useless ninjas. Now, however, Kiba couldn't help but remember Naruto's somber expression, while finding a disturbingly similar feeling resonating in him. Naruto's

wasn't the look of failure; it was the look of success, right after you got a glimpse of

the attached price tag. While frantically trying to stamp down on his newfound respect for the fellow genin, Kiba realized that his mother hadn't stopped talking... And he hadn't been listening.

"...and that cute kid even prepared dinner for all of us. I was impressed. So, Kiba", Tsume finished sagely, "Kurenai's team is a good pack."

Kiba nodded mutely, perfectly aware that there was something important his mother had been trying to convey, that had passed miles above his head. As he got up and reached his bed, he had an uncharacteristic buzzing in his head, which only grew louder as his body shut down.

It wasn't making sense. Kiba openly admired his parents. He loved being an Inuzuka and the huge world of sensation his blood and training opened for him. But he knew his role in Team Seven, and it was nothing like Naruto's. He was the tracker, he would warn the others about danger, and Akamaru and him were handy in a fight. One day he would be just as strong as his father, which was more than enough to get things done. And that was it. All Naruto did was... Well, be loud and obnoxious and eat ramen.

And he'd killed two missing-nins. Big deal. After Hyuuga and Aburame had been taken out, his mother said.

It dawned on him right then, at the edge of sleep.

It wasn't about fighting or anything else. What Naruto had done, was protect his teammates. That was Naruto's place in the pack. "The same as mine", he whispered. Inspired by his discovery, he turned it around in his head. Did he like it? Was it enough for him? Was it worth the trouble? Would it matter if his worth was recognized or not?

Unbidden, images from the previous days came to mind. Kiba wondered at Sasuke's expression of triumph as those weird things appeared in his eyes, and he could suddenly see into the future. Kiba figured the future wasn't a happy place. Then Kiba stared at Sakura's tear-stained face as she broke down crying and hugged them both, her arms painfully constricting their necks, right after the tragedy on the bridge. Girl had muscles.

Yeah, Kiba decided; it will have to do. He would keep his pack safe.

After all, they wouldn't stand a chance without him.

# Stress Testing

Chapter 12

Naruto stared down at his paper, holding his head in his hands. The rules, as explained by the scarred special jonin, were pretty straightforward. The teams were split up into randomly-assigned seats before the test papers were passed out. Everyone started with ten points, but wrong answers cost a point for each question. Getting caught cheating cost you *two* points every time you were caught. Run out of points and get removed from the exam. Simple, right? Oh, and if you get a zero your teammates fail as well… Just answer the questions and don't cheat, right?

Except for the fact that Uzumaki Naruto was abysmally bad with written tests. They were the bane of his existence at the Konoha Ninja Academy. Practical exercises were different. He failed a lot of those too, but at least there was a chance. Sometimes he could figure out a way to succeed, or work around the rules. Like with the kunai-throwing examination – Iruka hadn't specifically forbidden him to use an explosive tag, and the bull's-eye was certainly destroyed, even if he'd struck the target three inches to the left of center…

But a written test… there was only one way to answer them correctly. No way to distract the examiner and move the starting line. And only *one* correct way to actually do the problem. No room for creativity at all.

A drop of sweat rolled down Naruto's forehead and traced a path down his nose. He rubbed at it irritably. At least the first question wasn't multiple-choice. *The parabola, B, represents a shuriken's path after being thrown by an enemy ninja from a height of seven meters. Calculate the strength of the enemy ninja that can be observed from the trajectory followed by the shuriken and figure out the maximum throwing distance on flat ground. Explain your reasoning.*

*Oh crap,* he thought with horror, *it's even worse - they want me to do math!*

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Hinata leaned forward with her eyes closed, appearing to be lost in thought to an outside observer. This motion also caused her short hair to hang slightly forward along the sides of her face, as her hands moved under the desk. She oh so carefully twisted her concealed fingers into the seals that would activate her family blood-limit, whispering "Byakugan" in a ghost of a whisper. Her chakra flow was so slow, and so controlled, that the students on either side of her didn't even look up. The bulging veins on her temples were now concealed by her hair, so she gave no outward sign as her closed eyes scanned the papers of nearby candidates. If she was going to cheat, as this test seemed to require, she was determined not to get caught.

Finding one who seemed to have filled out most of his test, she began memorizing his answers. Everything was going according to plan. She'd hoped when they began assigning seats that she'd be able to sit near Naruto-kun, but of course the 'random' assignments would be altered to separate teammates. Much as she wished she could help her friends, she was confident that they would find some way to succeed.

---

Shino nodded slightly as his spy returned. A specially-bred subspecies of kikai, it had extremely well-developed compound eyes to assist with reconnaissance missions.

Unfortunately, its brain wasn't quite as well-developed. Though he could communicate with it easily by using one of his attuned queens, its conversational skills were as underdeveloped as those of his teammate when contemplating hot ramen. In addition, the flying insect's memory was only sufficient to memorize a single answer at a time.

Though tedious to use, it was effective nonetheless. He only hoped that his teammates were also finding ways to succeed. A single zero would bar the entire team from progressing.

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Naruto sweated as he looked over the other test questions. None of them looked particularly easy. Most of them he felt he could eventually puzzle out given unlimited time or access to the right books, but he had neither at the moment.

*Why is this test so freaking hard?* He asked himself, grinding his teeth in frustration. *I don't think anyone in my class, except maybe Sakura, could answer all of these in time! Why did they even let us take this test? We're not going to get any experience if we fail in the first hour!*

That gave him pause, and Naruto's face went blank as he pondered this. Kurenai-sensei wouldn't put them into this situation if it was impossible, so there had to be a way around it. He went over the rules again, how the points were awarded and how points were deducted if you were caught cheating. Funny how lenient that was. Iruka-sensei would kick you out of the classroom if he caught you cheating on one of *his* tests.

Naruto's eyes narrowed. *Why is this test so hard, but easier on that one aspect. It's almost like they want to encourage… I'm an idiot. This is a Shinobi Rank Exam. They want to see how sneaky we can be.*

Right at that moment, one of the proctors called out a number, making Naruto jump in his seat. "Number 52, you fail," he said in a bored tone. "17 and 43, you can follow your teammate out into the hall." Naruto glanced over at the chuunin as the angry genin filed out of the room. The predatory gleam in the older shinobi's eyes held a hint of triumph, but no anger or outrage.

His suspicions were correct. The chuunin proctors were his real opponents.

As more teams were eliminated, Naruto began to sweat harder. He needed to find the answers, but he kept his eyes on his own paper. Those proctors were not messing around!

It wasn't until one of the shinobi wearing a Suna marker and lots of face paint asked to be excused that he got some inspiration. Less than a minute later, Naruto had the rough outlines of a plan worked out. He just wished he had Shino handy to look for flaws…

"What is it, twenty-three?" the young-looking proctor on his row said when Naruto raised his hand.

"I, uh, need to go to the bathroom too," Naruto stammered. He grimaced and held his stomach. "I think I drank some bad milk," he added.

The proctor didn't react, other than to smoothly rise to his feet and gesture for Naruto to follow. Naruto wisely kept his eyes down for the most part, but out of the corner of his eye he saw Sakura look up, eyes widening in surprise, as they walked past.

In a quiet voice, the proctor directed him to go to down the stairs to second floor, before proceeding down the hall. Naruto guessed that they wanted to make sure he and that Suna-nin didn't come into contact. That was fine with him, if he was with Sabaku no Gaara, he was at least dangerous by proxy.

But to Naruto's dismay, the proctor followed him into the bathroom, standing beside the sinks. Naruto clutched his stomach again and ducked into one of the stalls. Aware that the chuunin could see under the stall doors, Naruto dropped his trousers and sat down. He also pushed up the jacket sleeve on his left arm leaving the skin of his forearm exposed. After pausing long enough to *very* carefully mold the chakra, he coughed loudly as his fingers formed the seals.

There was a loud pop, immediately supplemented by Naruto placing his mouth on his forearm and blowing hard. The noise was

deafening in the enclosed space as mist billowed out under the stall door.

In a flash, Naruto fixed his sleeve and pulled his pants up. He flushed and opened the stall door and stepped out toward the sinks, in time to see the chuunin edging back from the smoke. "Gomen," Naruto said as he quickly washed his hands, "definitely some bad milk, but I'm lucky it was just gas. Wouldn't want to do that in the middle of the exam though."

The chuunin didn't say a word, but his steps as he led Naruto back to the examination room were a bit quicker than before, as if he was reluctant to let Naruto get too close.

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No sooner did the sound of their footsteps fade within the bathroom then the other stall doors flew open and the three Narutos crouched on top of the toilets jumped out. Their faces screwed up in concentration as they made the seals with their hands and suddenly they were replaced by Umino Iruka, Maito Gai, and Yuuhi Kurenai.

The two faux jonin and the faux chunnin left the bathroom quickly, moving with purpose. But not before washing their hands, of course. It was fortunate that no one was on hand to wonder what the genjutsu mistress was doing in the male restroom.

Moving quickly across the rooftops of Konoha, the three clones descended on the library. They only had a handful of minutes to get the information Naruto needed and get it back to him. Luckily, each only needed to look up information for three or four questions, and Naruto had already given some thought on where to find the information. So while the Kurenai-clone was opening up a book on ciphers, looking for a match to the one seen on the exam, the Iruka-clone had a physics book open and was scratching down equations for the kunai problem and the Gai-clone was looking up the names of the founding kage for each village. Working independently, the kage bunshin found the answers, or most of the answers, within their allotted time and met up at the entrance to the library.

But as they made their way back to the building where the examination was being held, the final obstacle confronted them, one the original Naruto didn't have enough information about to work out ahead of time. Their information was useless if they couldn't get it to Naruto before the test was over.

With all the foreign shinobi, the building was heavily guarded, and getting out without speaking to someone was a lot easier than getting back in. The closest they could get without a risky encounter was a rooftop that had a view of the side windows to the examination room.

Using a well-polished forehead protector as a mirror, they tried to reflect the mid-day sun at an angle to catch Naruto's eye. Using a signal code to transmit their information would be time-consuming, but it was better than nothing at all.

The only problem was the original Naruto's determination to not get caught cheating. He never looked up enough for the light to catch his eye.

Unfortunately, their efforts did not go completely unnoticed.

"I can't believe you three," an annoyed-sounding voice spoke up behind them.

In spite of themselves, the three clones jumped guiltily and spun around. A Konoha shinobi with a cloth over his head and a senbon needle in the corner of his mouth was glaring at them. "I thought it was a little odd to hear about such young teams in the exam, but I never thought I'd find some of you cheating for your students. The Hokage is going to be very disappointed."

The Kurenai-clone, realizing the man's assumption, spoke up without thinking. "No don't!" he pleaded, before he realized that he wasn't acting anything at all like his cool and rational sensei. The thought of getting Kurenai-sensei in trouble with the Hokage had evidently short-circuited his common sense.

The other Shinobi picked up on this as well. "Okay, who the hell are you?" he demanded as senbon needles appeared between his curled fingers. When the clones didn't immediately answer, he whipped his hands up and flung the needles at the imposters.

The clones tried to dodge the missiles. Often senbon were coated with drugs or poisons to disable the target, but given how much chakra they had left, the first hit would be fatal. But as they crouched down or threw themselves to the side, the Konoha Shinobi did a seal and the senbon seemed to multiply in mid-air. Each clone was punctured by one or more needles and exploded into a puff of smoke.

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Naruto abruptly stiffened in his seat as his brain was suddenly flooded with information. *That jerk!* He cursed to himself, *why did he have to interfere with… Wait! How do I know what happened to my clones? I wasn't there…*

His questions cut off as he abruptly realized that he had the information needed for the test now. He went back to the first question and began writing down the equations before he forgot them. There would be plenty of time to think about his clones when he wasn't taking a test.

Naruto's pencil moved frantically as he filled in the squares allotted for his answers. As he provided workable solutions to the first nine questions, the knot in his stomach slowly began to loosen. It was by no means perfect, but at least he'd been able to 'show his work' on all of them… a better showing than he'd ever made at the Konoha Ninja Academy.

Of course, all his nervous tension quickly returned when Ibiki's voice jarred him out of his reverie, almost making him drop his pencil.

"Okay," the scary-looking man barked, "I will now give the tenth problem!"

Naruto couldn't help but glance at the clock. Indeed, forty-five minutes had passed since the beginning of the test. It had only *felt* like an eternity. This Ibiki guy really should be working at the Academy – he was perfect for that place.

His musings were cut short as the weird Suna shinobi *finally* returned from the bathroom, only to get a sarcastic remark from the examiner. Naruto wondered if the guy didn't get enough fiber in his diet – he certainly looked dyspeptic enough as he returned to his seat.

"I will now explain," the scar-faced man in the black trench coat continued. "This is… a hopeless rule. First, you are all going to choose if you wish to take this tenth problem or not."

"Choose?" asked a blond kunoichi with a Suna hitai-ite worn loosely around her neck like Hinata. Despite her hairstyle, she was the most normal-looking person from Suna that he'd noticed so far.

"If you choose not to take it, your points will be reduced to zero," Ibiki answered with a faint smile, "In other words, you will fail. Your two teammates will fail along with you."

That statement, of course, sparked off a low rumble of muttered comments and denials from the remaining candidates. Naruto's eyes narrowed. This couldn't be that easy.

"And here is the other rule," Ibiki continued, ignoring them all as he seemed to savor the moment. "If you choose to take it and you get it wrong, you will lose the privilege of taking the Chuunin Exam forever."

Unsurprisingly, Inuzuka Kiba was the first to break the shocked silence. "What kind of dumb rule is that?" he demanded. "There are people here who have taken the Chuunin Exam in the past!" Of course, the boy's indignant fury was not enhanced by the small white dog on his head punctuating his statement with two high-pitched barks.

Ibiki just *laughed* at that, a sound that seemed to send chills down Naruto's back to gather in the pit of his stomach. "You were unlucky," he said. "This year, *I* am the rule. That is why I give you the option of quitting. Those who are not confident can choose not to take it, and take the exam next year, or the year after that." He chuckled again, and Naruto felt his jaw clench.

"Let us begin," Ibiki said. "Those who will not be taking the tenth question, raise your hands. After we confirm your numbers, we will have you leave."

After a long moment, the first hand went up from a seat near Naruto. An older-looking Konoha genin with a goatee and a pinched-looking face stood up. "I quit!" he said, looking like he was in pain, "I won't take it!" The man apologized to his teammates as their numbers were called out as well, but the one Naruto could see didn't seem to mind very much.

As he turned to watch them file out, he saw Hinata. She seemed to have shrunk down in her seat and her face had gone very pale. He tried to give her an encouraging smile, but her eyes seemed frantic with worry. That puzzled Naruto as he turned back around. Hinata didn't seem to be that concerned with her rank, so much as becoming stronger so her father would appreciate her, the bastard, so why… then it hit him. *His* dream was to become Hokage, not hers. She was worried about *him* . Naruto frowned as he pondered this.

That first surrender seemed to open the floodgates as others raised their hands. After their numbers were called, each team filed silently out of the room. Some looked relieved, some looked angry… but to Naruto, the worst were the ones who filed out silently, their faces impassive masks. He wondered if those would remain shinobi much longer – he doubted those teams would remain intact for the next Chuunin Exam. How bad would it be, to fail the examination because one of your teammates lost… their nerve? Or chose to make the team fail so they didn't personally risk being barred forever from Chuunin?

Naruto's eyes narrowed as they focused on the chief examiner. He was *playing* with them, in some sick way. The man had a slight smile at the corner of his mouth. Seeing that, and remembering Hinata's obvious distress made something inside of him snap. In a sick way, it was gratifying to have someone more concerned about his ambitions than their own, but she deserved a lot better than to be tormented for it. He couldn't talk to her, and hand signals were not practical for this, so he'd have to do it indirectly.

Naruto vaulted onto his desk, taking care *not* to step on his test paper. He pointed accusingly at Ibiki and yelled, "This is a load of crap!"

The examining room went dead silent.

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Hinata's hand was twitching, about to be raised, when Naruto-kun's voice rang out. She'd been engaged in a fierce internal debate in the short time since the terms of the tenth question had been explained. She didn't want to see the end of Naruto's ambitions occur in this stuffy classroom. It would crush him if he was forever limited to genin, and she didn't ever want to see such a thing happen. For a moment she wondered if this whole examination had been constructed as a trap to trick Naruto into destroying his dreams. Once, she would never have thought people could be so cruel, but the more time she spent with Naruto, the more she saw how he was treated. There were adults in Konoha who wouldn't hesitate to do something so cruel in an effort to avenge themselves on what they saw as the Kyuubi no Kitsune. She wasn't sure if Naruto saw the trap laid before him or not… would it be up to her to save him from himself?

She'd darted a quick glance at Shino, but he seemed unperturbed by the situation. Not that he ever really showed any emotion when he was caught off guard. Her hand had been trembling from nervous tension when Naruto's shouted accusation made her go rigid in her seat.

"Number twenty-three, what is your problem?" the examiner asked in a bored tone.

"Even if they gave you the authority to make such a rule," Naruto growled, "do you think another village's kage will cooperate and not allow their own genin to ever test again?"

"You seem awfully sure of that," Ibiki said. "Are you willing to bet your future on that? This is a choice that will impact the rest of your life."

Naruto put his fists on his hips and straightened up even more. Hinata's breath caught in her throat. "I bet my life every time I go on a mission and I never give up – it's my way of the ninja! And even if they did let you bar me forever, I'll still get stronger and I'll just be the first genin to become Hokage… and then I'll fire your ass for making up stupid rules!"

With that, Hinata relaxed a little, because it *was* true. Naruto would not let them stop him from realizing his ambitions. She was wrong to have doubted him, even for a second. She was wondering if she should get up on her desk as well, to show her support when the examiner spoke at last. "We'll see if your gamble pays off, twenty-three. Now get off that desk before I disqualify you immediately for insubordination!"

Naruto hopped back into his chair, but Hinata could still faintly feel the waves of killer intent coming from her teammate.

"For the rest of you, this is your last chance to leave before your fate is sealed," the scar-faced examiner announced in a deep voice that made Hinata's insides twist. She concentrated on the spike of anger that came from her friend. She would see it through with him, or not at all. As teammate, friend, or even the Chuunin guarding the door to his office… where he lead, she would follow… watching his back.

Ibiki-san waited, looking around the room. But Hinata didn't think anyone else would leave after Naruto's words.

And she was right.

"For the First Exam, everyone here… passes!"

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Naruto stared at the examiner, wondering if he'd heard him correctly.

Sakura, surprisingly, was the first to ask the question they were all thinking. "Wait, what's the meaning of that? We pass already? What about the tenth question?"

That lead to the one of the scariest things Naruto had ever seen… even worse than Gai and Lee singing karaoke of "I Got You, Babe!" at Lee's celebration.

Morino Ibiki was *laughing* .

Not a sarcastic chuckle, either. A full-blown, mouth hanging open, belly laugh. "There was no such thing to begin with," he explained with a wide smile that made Naruto want to reach for a kunai, "or you can call the choice you made the real tenth question."

"So what were those previous nine problems?" the Suna Kunoichi asked in an annoyed tone. "It was all a waste!"

"No, it wasn't," Ibiki disagreed. "Those problems accomplished their purpose, testing each individual's information gathering skills…"

As Ibiki explained how testing as a group just added to the tension, since people didn't want to let their teams down, it just reinforced Naruto's opinion that the man was a natural sadist… and that his guesses about the test had been correct. At least that was somewhat gratifying.

It wasn't until the examiner removed the cloth covering the top of his head that Naruto was distracted from his musings. He had a similar cloth for concealing his bright hair color, but Ibiki's was for a far different purpose.

"Information can have greater value than life at times, and in missions or on battlefields," he said as everyone stared at the gouges and massive keloid scars that covered the top of his head, leaving no hair at all on the ruined scalp. "Information is paid for with the lives of people!"

"If you are detected acquiring information, the enemy can then account for that, making it far less useful. They may even use what you learned to lure your side into a trap," Ibiki continued as he re-tied the cloth around the top of his head. "That can lead to a disaster for your team and your village. So we eliminated those that were not able to gather information without being caught."

"But then what about that last question?" the Suna kunoichi asked, although this time in a much more subdued voice.

"That question was the main point of this exam," Ibiki answered spreading his arms dramatically. "You were presented with a 'do or die' situation, being given the choice to go for the question or not… Look at it this way. You are a Chuunin, and your mission is to capture a secret document, but the opposition, their numbers, and their capabilities are unknown. There may be traps set up in advance by the enemy. Now… will you accept this mission or not? Just because your life and the lives of your teammates may be in danger, are you able to avoid dangerous missions? The answer is no."

Naruto frowned, trying to reconcile this with what Kurenai-sensei had been telling him. She'd been awfully cautious about all the situations Team 8 seemed to get into… But she hadn't turned down the border patrol mission, had she? And Kurenai-sensei had agreed that Hinata was right to lead them against the kidnappers. Maybe it was less avoiding dangerous missions than it was planning ahead and working to minimize those dangers?

"There are missions that carry heavy risks," Ibiki continued, "but cannot be avoided. This is what we look for in a Chuunin, or squad leader. Those who cannot bet their lives in a critical situation… those who give up when given the chance because there is a next year,

and let their minds be swayed over an uncertain future… They are fools with no determination who have no right to become a Chuunin. You are here because you gave the right answer for the tenth question, and you can deal with the difficulties you will face."

Naruto blinked and swallowed.

"The first portion of the Chuunin Examination ends now," Ibiki announced. "I wish you luck," he concluded in a voice that sounded strangely sincere to Naruto.

Of course, this touching scene was utterly disrupted when a dark object exploded through the side windows in a hail of glass that narrowly missed the head examiner. Two kunai were thrown into the ceiling supporting the corners of the unfolding bundle of dark cloth. When the cloth finished unfolding behind the figure straightening up from her landing, it announced "Second Examiner, Mitarashi Anko is here" in kanji characters two feet tall.

To say the woman was dressed oddly, even by Konoha Shinobi standards, was to make a massive understatement. She wore a skin-tight metal mesh body suit that ended well above her knees, along with shin guards over her sandals, a very short miniskirt, and a tan, knee-length trench coat.

"Everyone, there's no time to be happy!" She announced, "I am the Second Examiner, Mitarashi Anko." As if they couldn't read.

"Let's go to the next exam!" she roared raising her fist into the air. "Follow me!"

The silence as all the genin stared at her was deafening.

"I don't think they get you," Ibiki said quietly as he stepped out from behind the hanging cloth.

She didn't answer, but just frowned at the remaining candidates. "Ibiki," she said out of the corner of her mouth, "why did you let so

many pass? The First Exam must have been too soft." She concluded with a glare.

"It looks like there are a lot of good students this time," Ibiki said diplomatically, and Naruto had the impression that they'd known each other before the exams.

"Oh well," she said. "I'm going to have to make more than half the teams fail in the next exam. I'm getting excited!"

Naruto swallowed. If anything, she was even weirder than Ibiki.

"I will explain the details tomorrow," Anko announced. "We will go somewhere else, so ask your jounin sensei about the rally point and time. That is all. Dismissed."

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Several of the Konoha jonin-sensei were occupying an unused lounge at the Hokage's tower. The space was normally a back-up ready room used when a full ANBU muster was called, something that almost never happened. But the seats were comfortable, there was an ashtray for Asuma, and talking amongst themselves gave the jonin something to do while their students were tested.

The fact that the Hokage always reserved the room for them, and that it was far away from the examination building, was surely just a coincidence.

Despite her intentions, Yuuhi Kurenai found herself on edge as she sat there, brooding about how her team would do… especially under a sadistic genius like Morino Ibiki.

She'd come to know Ibiki from her debriefing after the disaster that claimed the lives of her sensei and teammates. It was only later that she realized the significance of having a man of his talents in charge… but by that point she could view the circumstances dispassionately enough to understand.

When all but one member of a team was wiped out, it was natural that there should be some suspicions. Had she betrayed them? Was she a disguised infiltrator? Had she struck a deal with the attackers to spare her life?

Ibiki listened once to her fragmentary, disjointed description of what had happened. He asked her a few questions, and then sent her off to the hospital to have her wounds tended. He'd visited her there several times to check off various details in her story, but his face had not betrayed any signs of disbelief… or any other emotion.

It wasn't until over a month later, when she'd had time to think about what had happened and gone looking for him, that she discovered he was the head of the ANBU Torture and Interrogation Unit. The realization that she'd been under suspicion when she returned was daunting, but it didn't stop her from telling him of her own thoughts.

He'd stared at her for a long moment after she finished. His eyes flickered toward the seals painted on the walls and she realized that, with his door closed, his office was one of the few places in Konoha that guaranteed absolute privacy.

That's when he agreed with her that the circumstances of the attack did not add up. Too much force had been used to gain too small an objective. There was something else at stake - that much was clear. He'd also cautioned her to keep her head down and her thoughts to herself until such time as she had iron-clad proof of her accusations, lest she be made to join her team in the afterlife.

Kurenai's stomach was churning as she left that meeting, which Morino Ibiki had logged as the 'final debriefing from aborted mission #2579-b'. It was gratifying that he'd taken her seriously – too many sexist fools would disregard the words of young kunoichi, regardless of her intelligence. It was a relief that such a professional agreed that something *was* going on here – she wasn't just suffering from paranoid delusions triggered by her grief. But at the same time, his observations had chilled her. Whoever had set them up had access to resources and information to a degree that was frankly terrifying

when she stopped to consider the implications. And this unknown party had demonstrated no compunctions about shedding blood to achieve their goal. Her future survival truly depended on her discretion.

She'd never felt so alone as she walked back to her family's house. Fortunately they were out of town on a visit to one of her father's suppliers in Wind Country when she'd returned to Konoha – at least she'd been able to spare her mother the worry of her only daughter being in the hospital. But any mistakes she made if she tried to pursue an investigation could cost them their lives as well… so she decided to wait until they returned and speak to them both.

A week later, a scroll arrived, detailing the fire that claimed her parents' lives. At that point, Yuuhi Kurenai realized what being all alone really meant.

Kurenai shook her head, as if to clear it of unwanted memories, and glanced up at the clock. The test should be over by now. She glanced at the others sitting there. Kakashi was reading one of his little orange books, Gai was doing one-armed push-ups on the floor, and Asuma was smoking and trying to talk Gai into joining him in some elaborate betting pool regarding the exam results.

The door to the temporary waiting room opened and everyone looked up. However, instead of Ibiki with the test results, they saw two of the younger special-jonin, Gekko Hayate and Shiranui Genma. The latter stopped after entering the room and just started laughing for some strange reason.

"What's so funny?" Asuma asked in a faintly belligerent tone.

Hayate just shook his head and elbowed Genma. "Sorry, but we have to ask. Have any of you left the lounge since the exam started?"

All four jonin shook their heads.

Hayate let out a sigh. "That's what I thought," he said.

By this time Genma had mastered his amusement and cocked his head, peering at them. It seemed to Kurenai that his attention was focused on her and Gai. "At least the henge were good likenesses," he said after a moment.

"Excuse me?" Kurenai asked, narrowing her eyes.

Genma looked over at Hayate, who sighed and nodded. "I was assigned to patrolling near the examination building this afternoon," Genma explained. "I caught three people on a rooftop trying to signal someone in the examination room. They *appeared* to be you and Gai-san, along with Umino Iruka, one of the Chuunin who teach at the Academy, but when I confronted them they didn't act quite right." Genma shook his head at that point. "I hit them with some poisoned senbon, but they just exploded… I'm pretty sure now that they were shadow clones. I stopped them, but we're still wondering who did it."

Kurenai shook her head. She knew of only one clone-user that would pick her, Gai, and Iruka as models. But what the hell was he thinking?

Kakashi looked up from his book. "Since the first exam is over now, did Ibiki-san use the Prisoner's Dilemma, the Impossible Task, or something even more devious and twisted on our students?"

Hayate looked puzzled at the question, but he answered the copy-ninja nonetheless. "I believe he went with the second option, with two of his confederates seeded into the examinees to copy from."

At that point, Kakashi's face twisted under his ever-present mask. It wasn't until Kurenai noted the tilt in his visible eye that she realized he was smiling. "You've been had, Genma-san."

"What do you mean?" Kurenai asked sharply.

"Do any of you regularly use Kage Bunshin no Jutsu?" Kakashi asked.

Everyone shook their heads.

Kakashi shrugged. "It's not surprising; it takes a lot of chakra to summon a clone that will disappear the first time it's hit. More than a few will tap my reserves, so it's only useful in certain situations. One of the reasons it's such a chakra drain is because you are molding enough chakra for it to have a physical presence, without a sustaining material to give it mass, like with Mizu Bunshin. Another reason is because the user is creating a faint impression of his consciousness on the bunshin, allowing it to think somewhat independently."

Kurenai remembered working with Shino on the roof repairs, and carrying on a conversation with one of Naruto's clones, thinking it was the original. "Does the degree of independent thought depend on the amount of chakra used to create the clone?" she asked curiously. It was odd, once you got Kakashi talking about the technical details of an advanced jutsu, how his goofball persona seemed to just fall away for a time.

"To a degree," Kakashi agreed with a nod. "One side effect of the impression process is this: when a clone is dispelled, the knowledge and memories gained by this secondary consciousness will revert to the original."

"So what you're saying," Asuma interrupted, crushing out his cigarette, "is the jutsu user will know everything the clone knows?"

"That's right," Kakashi said. "I remember the night we agreed on the team assignments, Iruka said something about Uzumaki Naruto mastering Kage Bunshin no Jutsu?"

Kurenai frowned. "Yes, and those were probably his clones. But from the way you described Ibiki's strategy… I believe you called it 'The

Impossible Task', and his use of confederates… the students were supposed to cheat to pass?"

Kakashi shrugged, but Hayate nodded slightly.

"It sounds like Naruto had enough time that night to learn a jounin-level technique," Kakashi said with an obvious smirk under his mask, "but not enough time to read all the fine print. Otherwise his clones wouldn't have been trying so hard to signal him… they could have just dispersed themselves to give him whatever information they had collected."

"Wait!" Genma shouted, the ever-present senbon falling out of the corner of his mouth. "That means when I…"

"When you disrupted his clones, you helped them achieve their mission," Kakashi said lightly. "I'm sure Kurenai-sama appreciates you helping her genin… maybe you should ask her out on a date?"

Kurenai glared at the infamous copy-ninja. "Do you really think you have enough traps guarding your 'literature' collection, Kakashi?"

Kakashi paled for a moment, but then nodded.

"If I hired my team for a C-rank mission to burn them all, it would be money well spent," she replied. "Do you really want to bet all your little orange books against the deviousness of the most notorious prankster to ever graduate from the Academy? I must warn you, he's been saving up – he even fooled me once with a genjutsu."

Kakashi visibly swallowed and slowly shook his head.

Asuma grunted. "You fight dirty," he said approvingly.

Kurenai just smiled at him.

At this point Genma was banging his head against the wall, while Hayate tried to console him. Gai finished his push-ups, but seemed to still have a lot of nervous energy. He jumped to his feet and began

lecturing Kakashi about how he should never try to be 'cool and hip' toward Kurenai-san, a sensei who so obviously understood the power of youth… not noticing that Kakashi had his nose again buried in the book cradled protectively in his hands.

All the noise was starting to give Kurenai a headache, so she got up and began walking toward the door. As she reached out to open it, it moved aside on its own. Ibiki stood in the doorway, his face impassive but his dark eyes glittering as she stepped back to allow him entrance.

"Is that Uzumaki brat one of yours?" he asked without greeting.

Kurenai merely raised an eyebrow. His words betrayed more emotion than he usually allowed to show. "Yes. Yes, he is. What of it?"

"That's what I thought," he said as he handed her the test results. "Got your fingerprints all over him, so to speak. Got one of the highest scores without being observed cheating at all, my assistants are still trying to figure out how he did it."

"He had some unwitting assistance," Kurenai replied absently as her eyes flitted down the scoring summary. She smiled slightly. All of her genin had done well, exceptionally well in fact. She looked up at Ibiki, who was visibly glowering. "We just figured it out – you can ask Genma. Now what else happened?"

Ibiki sighed. "The last question was a gut-check, to see if they could commit in a high-stress situation. I told them that if they chose to answer the last question and failed, they could never take the exam again."

Kurenai frowned. "That must have gone over well."

"Well, it did the job. All the wimps were bailing out like rats leaving a sinking ship, when your genin jumps up on his desk and starts shouting at me," Ibiki continued, scowling. "He tells me I don't have

the authority to declare such a rule, and if I did, he'd be the first genin to become Hokage and then he'd fire me."

"Fire you?" Kurenai asked, going very still. When Asuma nudged her shoulder, she handed him the exam results, still maintaining iron-rigid self control.

"Yes," Ibiki confirmed sarcastically. "I believe the exact words were 'I'll fire your ass for making up stupid rules!'."

"I see," Kurenai said as she carefully edged toward the doorway. "I'll have a word with him immediately regarding his language," she promised as she slipped out into the hallway.

If anyone in the room heard the sound of muffled feminine laughter receding down the hallway, they chose not to say anything about it.

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To his credit, Naruto actually blushed at Moritake's that evening when Kurenai questioned him regarding his words toward Morino Ibiki. It was clear he'd been overwrought when he'd confronted the special jonin, so she eventually let it pass. Overall, she was in far too good a mood to let anything minor spoil it. All three of her genin had tested out near the top of the group, even when counting only those who had passed. Though she would never say so aloud, Hinata and Shino doing well was only to be expected… but Uzumaki Naruto had never seemed to be much for scholastic excellence, or even subtlety. She hoped that Iruka took the opportunity to rub his colleagues' noses in that fact when the scores were released to the Academy. Naruto's use of kage bunshin had been inspired, even if it did indicate that he wasn't fully aware of how they worked.

Not that she refrained from bringing that up when it was his turn to describe his tactics. The rosy blush that returned to his face more than made up for any embarrassment she'd suffered in the jonin lounge. On the other hand, it was gratifying to note that he'd already mostly figured out that aspect of kage bunshin on his own.

Moreover, she was cautiously optimistic regarding the confrontation between Naruto and Ibiki. Of course, the jonin had been irked at how… publicly… Naruto had called his bluff. But at worst, he'd only have to deal with some kidding from the other instructors. Out of anyone in Konoha, she was sure the head of the ANBU torture and interrogation squad could appreciate what had been done to Naruto, and respect the boy for not turning into a murderous beast. Even his comments earlier that day had been laced with grudging respect. Hopefully when the time came, he would regard defending Naruto from a faceless conspiracy to be in the best interests of Konohagakure.

As they finished their meal, Kurenai also couldn't help but notice that Hinata had been even more quiet than usual. The pale eyed girl described her surreptitious use of the Byakugan in as few words as possible, looking down the whole time. She even looked uncomfortable when Naruto praised her for being 'extra sneaky'.

After giving her students directions on how to reach the second examination, using a map of the Konoha training areas, Kurenai suggested that they go home early to pack their equipment and get as much rest as possible. But after she paid the bill, she followed her students out.

"Hinata, would you stay a moment?" she asked the Hyuuga girl in a voice that was little more than a whisper.

The girl nodded. As soon as Naruto and Shino were out of sight, Kurenai spoke again. "Now what's bothering you?"

The young kunoichi looked even more uncomfortable, if that was possible. "A-ano, Kurenai-sensei… I am j-just disappointed in myself," she said quietly.

Kurenai refrained from comment as she gestured for Hinata to follow her. After they both sat down on a bench not too far from Moritake's entryway, she took a deep breath. Hyuuga Hiashi's treatment of his daughter was atrocious, and every time she had to deal with the

consequences, it became harder and harder to restrain her anger. "Please explain to me why you are disappointed, Hinata," she asked in as gentle a voice as she could manage. "I have heard nothing tonight that you should not be proud of."

"I'm sorry, sensei," Hinata said in a miserable tone, "it was wrong of me to conceal my failures. But I didn't want the others to know…" her voice trailed off. "To know how close I came to making us all fail," she added rapidly, the words practically tripping over each other.

Kurenai frowned, trying to make sense of the girl's words.

"During the tenth question…" she choked out. "I almost raised my hand. I couldn't bear the thought of Naruto being limited to genin for the rest of his life. I know he isn't stupid, but I thought maybe they'd introduced that rule because *he* was taking the test this year. So many people are cruel to him… I couldn't bear the thought of… but I should have believed in him!" Hinata's shoulders hitched as her words became fragmentary.

There were few people on the street in the early evening to witness the Hyuuga heir having a public breakdown, but nonetheless Kurenai quickly cast a simple genjutsu to conceal their identities. The last thing she wanted was word of this to reach the girl's father. Then she stiffly leaned over and wrapped her arm around her student's thin shoulders.

Hinata went utterly still for a moment, and Kurenai worried that she'd misread the girl's psychological state. She was about to lift her arm when Hinata turned and wrapped her arms around Kurenai with surprising strength. The girl was shaking like a leaf, but Maito Gai's weight training program had very noticeable results.

Kurenai swallowed the lump that tried to form in her throat. She'd long ago discarded any plans of settling down and raising a family, but moments like this made her question that decision. For other reasons, Hinata's reaction made her scowl. She wondered how long

had it been since anyone had comforted her in such a manner. Since her mother passed away?

When Hinata's trembling began to ebb and her breathing returned to normal, Kurenai finally spoke up. "Hinata, I don't see where you did anything wrong. You were concerned for your teammate, and were looking out for his best interests. When it was clear that he correctly assessed the risks and chose to continue, you went along with that. You have nothing to apologize for, either to me or to your teammates."

Hinata let go of her sensei in order to look up in at her in confusion. Kurenai ignored the odd pang she felt as she let go as well. "But I would have made us fail," Hinata protested in a small voice.

"But you didn't," Kurenai reminded her.

Hinata slowly shook her head. "Only because Naruto-kun stopped me," she protested. "It was foolish of me to think people would go to all this trouble to make Naruto fail," she continued.

Kurenai froze in place for a moment as she weighed the risks. It was only an instant, so she was mildly surprised when Hinata looked up at her. "Sensei?" the genin asked in a worried voice.

"Hinata," Kurenai said, choosing her words carefully. "There is something you should know, but you are under no circumstances to discuss this with anyone besides myself. Do I make myself clear?"

Hinata nodded, eyes even wider than normal.

Kurenai glanced around. No one was nearby, but she quickly performed another genjutsu that would mask their words from any curious ears. "Your suspicions are not completely unfounded," she told her student after a moment. "Between Shino, Iruka-sensei, and myself, we have uncovered signs that some people are acting in ways to hurt Naruto and prevent him from being accepted in the village. I don't think they would be able to change the Chuunin

Examination rules to accomplish this, but I am cautious about everything where Naruto is concerned."

Hinata's next words caught Kurenai completely off-balance. "Is my father involved?" she asked, tension visible in the trembling of her jaw.

"I don't know," was all Kurenai could say. She hadn't anticipated Hinata making that connection so fast. "The head of the Hyuuga clan would have the influence to do some of the things we've uncovered, but that alone is not proof."

Hinata's eyes had gone very still, and seemed to bore into Kurenai's as she spoke. "He asked me, after we returned from the border, about the fight with the kidnappers," Hinata said.

Kurenai's breath seemed to catch in her throat. If he knew that Naruto had drawn on the Kyuubi's chakra, he could use that to…

"However," Hinata continued, "I was unconscious for some of the battle and could not answer his questions. He seemed very disappointed."

Now Kurenai finally recognized why Hinata's eyes seemed to have unnerved her for an instant. Her student was *angry* . "Your discretion is highly appreciated, Hinata," she said evenly as she remembered a discussion between her own parents that she'd overheard a year before she graduated from the Academy.

They'd just returned from the funeral of one of her father's trading partners, one Hiroto Yasuri. He and his daughter Natsuki both died after eating a meal prepared with some wild mushrooms that turned out to have been highly poisonous. It was ruled to be an accident, but Kurenai's parents didn't believe it. The daughter had been thirty-nine at the time, an unusual age for a once attractive girl to remain unwed. It wasn't however, for a lack of suitors. Her father had rejected the young men of the village who'd asked permission to court his daughter, hoping she would catch the eye of one of the

nobility. He was extremely wealthy, but money couldn't buy entry into the nobility of Fire Country, so his only option was through marriage. Unfortunately, his insistence that his daughter could only marry someone of that class had left her alone until her youth had fled. While many who knew the family felt bad about the situation, Natsuki never complained and never spoke about it… But she'd prepared the meal that claimed her and her father's life.

Kurenai blinked, as she wondered what had stirred up that memory. As a shinobi of the Leaf, Hinata was not *quite* as constrained as Hiroto Natsuki had been. Perhaps it was the reminder that a meek and soft-spoken exterior could conceal surprising depths. It was a lesson she was sure that Hyuuga Hiashi had yet to learn.

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Naruto made sure he arrived at Training Area Forty-Four at least an hour before the second exam was scheduled to begin. As it was, Shino was already there, and Hinata arrived at roughly the same time. After all the nervous tension of the first exam, and then unwinding at the celebratory dinner at Moritake's, he'd fallen asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. Now, after sleeping far later than he was used to, he felt ready to take on the world.

Which was a good thing, given how some of the other examinees were eyeing him as they arrived at what signs announced was a 'forbidden area'.

Shino was quiet as he paced back and forth, facing the fence that marked the boundaries of the training area. Naruto had never seen his friend, well, *fidget* like that before. He supposed that the seriousness of the situation was finally getting to the normally unflappable Aburame.

Serious or not, he doubted Shino would appreciate him commenting on his behavior, so Naruto stood next to Hinata and went through his mental checklist of the equipment he'd packed. The instructions relayed from Kurenai-sensei said to come prepared as they usually would be for a mission. Given that some of their missions were

weeks long - that could mean a lot. Also, when he looked at sensei's map of the training areas, Area Forty-Four, located at the northwest edge of the village and extending well out into Fire Country, was a circle twenty kilometers in diameter. That suggested that the second exam might last far longer that the first.

So he, and to a lesser extent Hinata, had packed heavily for this 'mission'. The chakra-enhanced training weights on their wrists and ankles could always be adjusted to make up the extra weight. While doing this slightly changed their balance, they had adjusted by the time they reached the training area.

Hinata left the normal bag she carried around Konoha at home, and instead wore a full-sized backpack over her jacket. Naruto's pack was slightly oversized for his height, but was strapped on tightly and didn't interfere with his movements. He'd even tested this by wearing it during a sparring match with Lee the day after he'd purchased it from TenTen's father. The fabric directly over his back concealed a thin layer of metal links between it and the lining. It might not stop a kunai, but it could slow one down.

He also wore both kunai holsters and equipment pouches today. Some of the other genin looked at him curiously as they arrived, but others looked thoughtful or worried. He wondered briefly if they thought he had some inside information about the next stage, but it wasn't like they couldn't make the same deductions his team had.

He scowled for a moment. He was starting to sound like Shikamaru. Next thing he knew he'd be lying on his back, staring up at the sky and calling his teammates 'troublesome'.

He glanced over at Hinata. Truth be told, if he'd been stuck with Ino, it *would* have been troublesome. There was no doubt in his mind regarding which kunoichi he'd rather have backing him up. His mind wandered back to his former crush on Sakura, and he was surprised that his lingering anger and disappointment were gone. Perhaps talking with Lee had helped himself as well.

"Hey Hinata?" he asked quietly.

Hinata jumped a little, but quickly turned toward him.

"Do you think we might have forgotten anything?" he asked.

Hinata shook her head. "I went over my list three times last night before I went to bed. I checked it again this morning."

Naruto nodded. "I checked too, but I think I might have forgotten something."

Hinata shook her head again. "I don't think you'd-"

He smiled at her. "When I get excited, I sometimes forget the little things. You're more… what did Kurenai-sensei call it? Detail-oriented?"

Hinata blushed and looked down. "I'm sorry," she said. "I just get worried about forgetting something, so I tend to go over things compulsively."

Naruto frowned at her. "I think it's a good thing that you do. We'd probably screw up a lot more if you weren't looking out for us."

"Shino-kun is very careful with –" she objected, her cheeks coloring slightly.

"Okay," Naruto capitulated with a grin. " *I* would probably screw up a lot more if you weren't looking out for *me* ."

This time an unmistakable blush spread over her face, giving Naruto an odd sense of satisfaction. He'd been giving this a lot of thought. Kurenai-sensei wouldn't say exactly what was going on with Hinata, but she'd hinted a lot. Remembering how he'd felt when Kurenai complimented him on something… *acknowledging* that he'd done something praiseworthy… he'd started to understand why Hinata seemed so flustered and embarrassed when he tried to compliment her.

The problem was, he could understand why *he* was so unused to praise. But what reasons could there be for Hyuuga Hinata, heir and member of main family of one of the most prestigious clans in Konoha? That wasn't something he'd figured out yet, and sometimes he wondered if he really wanted to know. But in the meantime, he could build these elaborate traps out of words, maneuvering Hinata-chan into accepting his words at face value. It was odd, of course, how she seemed to want to believe him, but still couldn't… of course, that just added to the challenge didn't it? And Uzumaki Naruto lived for challenges.

"Hinata," he said suddenly. "Could you use your eyes to check me out?"

His teammate froze, her face turning even redder. "N-Naruto?" she choked out after a moment.

"I mean, with your Byakugan, you can see inside my backpack and see if I forgot anything," he explained. "I don't want to open it up and dump it out here in front of everyone," he continued. "I don't want anyone to see all the stuff I have packed."

"O-oh," Hinata said after a moment, as her face began to return to normal. "That makes sense, I suppose." Her fingers quickly formed the seal for her bloodline ability. "Byakugan!" she murmured. A hint of red remained on her cheeks as she circled around Naruto. "I can't see anything you missed," she said quickly, as her attention drifted down to his weapon pouches and kunai holsters for a moment. She quickly spun away and her eyes went back to normal. Oddly, her cheeks were flaming again.

"You seem to have plenty of shuriken and kunai," she said quietly, facing away from him. "Though you only packed one box of ration bars in your backpack. What if this takes more than a week?"

"That's still in there?" Naruto asked in surprise. "I thought I'd decided to throw it away. I figured I can always eat some tree bark if I get

hungry and can't find anything else. It would taste better." Maybe that would remind her of how much better her cooking tasted.

Hinata stifled a giggle at his comment. Unfortunately, her self-restraint wasn't perfect, as an extremely unlady-like snort escaped from her nose. She froze, mortified, as Naruto burst out laughing.

He wasn't trying to be cruel, but Uzumaki Naruto couldn't help it. It wasn't unheard of for someone to make an odd noise when muffling laughter, but to hear it come from his refined teammate was just *priceless* . The horrified look on her face just made it even funnier. It was a few moments before he could even stand up straight again. "Arigato, Hinata-san!" he said, bowing deeply before his embarrassed teammate.

"Naruto?" she asked, her curiosity seeming to override her embarrassment for the moment.

He gave her his widest smile. "Here I am, getting nervous about the exam, and wondering if I forgot something… and then you do something like that to distract me. You rock, Hinata!"

Hinata's face paled dramatically, then gradually returned to normal, albeit with a slight pinkish cast to it. Naruto felt inordinately pleased. He'd done something right, even if he wasn't sure what it was.

Shino finished his nervous pacing before too many of the other examinees arrived and stood next to them. Given some of the hateful looks they'd been given the previous day, Naruto preferred that they all stand together when around strangers. That wasn't even taking into account what they knew about Sabaku no Gaara.

Of course, this Mitarashi Anko wasn't exactly increasing his sense of security. He didn't even notice her arriving, which was unnerving enough. Her words didn't help either. "This is where the second exam will take place: the forty-fourth training area, also known as the Forest of Death," she explained in a casual, yet creepy voice.

Some of the candidates murmured at that.

"You will soon be able to experience why this place is called the Forest of Death," she continued happily. "But before we begin the Second Exam, I'm going to pass these out to everyone." With that, she pulled a thick stack of official looking forms out of her trench coat. "These are consent forms. Those taking the exam must sign these."

"Why?" several examinees asked.

"From here on, people will die," she replied in a casual tone. "Therefore we need people's consent before we continue. Otherwise, I'd be held accountable." She ended with chuckle, but no one else seemed to find her words funny.

"Now, I will begin to explain the second exam," she continued after a moment. "To be brief, this is going to be a survival test." She handed the stack of forms to Hinata, who took one and handed the stack to Naruto, who took a pair for himself and Shino before handing the rest to Shikamaru.

"This area," she explained as she unrolled a map she'd pulled out of her trench coat, "is a circular region surrounded by forty-four locked gates. In addition to rivers and forests, there is a tower in the middle. It's around ten kilometers from any entrance to the tower. Inside this area you will have to fend for yourselves as you battle over these scrolls," she explained, pulling two sealed scrolls from inside her trench coat as she replaced the map. Naruto wondered briefly if there was a jutsu that allowed her to carry so much stuff in it. The light-colored scroll displayed the kanji for 'Heaven', while the darker-colored one displayed the symbol for 'Earth'.

"Twenty-eight teams passed the First Exam," Anko explained. "Half of those teams will get the Heaven scroll. The other half will get the Earth scroll. Each team gets one scroll."

"What is needed to pass?" Sasuke asked in a serious tone, making several people look around.

"Bring the Scrolls of Heaven and Earth to the tower with your teammates," Anko answered.

"In other words, fourteen teams, half the people here, will get their scroll stolen and therefore fail," Sakura said thoughtfully.

"It also needs to be done within the time limit," Anko added. "This Second Exam has a time limit of one hundred twenty hours, or exactly five days."

"Five days?" Ino asked, incredulous.

"What about food?" Chouji asked, horrified.

"Scrounge it up yourself," Anko said in a dismissive tone, "This forest is a treasure box of nature. There should be plenty of food." Naruto had a feeling that Team Ten hadn't taken a look at a map, or realized the implications of the training area size, until now.

"However," Kabuto added helpfully, "there are a lot of man-eating beasts, poison bugs, and poisonous plants."

"Oh no!" Chouji murmured as Ino scolded him.

"This test seems quite difficult," Lee said with a grin that made his teeth gleam. Neji gave him a dirty look while Tenten sighed.

"And we're surrounded by enemies," Sasuke added thoughtfully. "We won't be able to sleep in peace."

"People will get hurt in the process of fighting over the scrolls," Anko said, "and those who cannot deal with the difficulties will be revealed."

"So can we forfeit if that happens?" Shikamaru asked.

"As a rule, you are not allowed to give up during the exam," Anko announced. "You will spend the full five days in the forest."

"Just as I thought," Shikamaru said with noticeable disgust in his voice. "How troublesome."

"While we're on this topic," Anko continued, ignoring the Nara boy, "here are the conditions that will fail you. First, if you do not arrive at the tower with three teammates and both scrolls, you fail. Second, if your team loses a member, you automatically fail. Finally, you are not allowed to look inside the scrolls until you reach the tower."

"What happens if we do?" Naruto asked curiously.

"Then you will get a surprise," Anko promised with a nasty smile. "If you become a Chuunin you will be handling top secret documents. It's a test of your reliability. That's it for the explanations. We will exchange three signed consent forms for one scroll over in that hut."

Naruto's eyes looked where she was pointing, and saw it was manned by several Chuunin proctors, some of which he recognized from the previous day.

"After you are assigned a gate entrance," Anko continued, "everyone will begin at the same time." She sighed gustily. "Here's a last piece of advice: Don't die!"

Naruto's eyes narrowed as he clenched his fists.

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It took a few minutes for the chuunin proctors to set up a curtain around the hut where the forms were to be turned in. This gave them plenty of time to fill them out, with a little left over for Ino and Sakura to snub each other. Naruto stretched to get some of the tension out of his shoulders, and saw Lee doing some warm-ups. The two boys exchanged a nod. While their teams had a fifty-fifty chance of competing directly against each other, depending on how the scrolls were distributed, they wouldn't forget Gai-sensei's words either. The

shinobi of the Leaf would stick together if the situation got out of hand and there was a chance of permanent harm.

When it was their turn, Team Eight moved silently behind the curtain. When the chuunin held out a Heaven scroll, both Hinata and Shino gestured toward Naruto. Naruto shrugged and silently removed his backpack, shoving the scroll all the way to the bottom before closing it and putting it back on. He was touched that his teammates wished to trust him with carrying their team's scroll, and vowed not to let them down.

After all of the teams were done, Anko sent each team off with a chuunin to guide them to their assigned gates. It wasn't long until they arrived at gate sixteen and waited for the chuunin guide to allow them inside. After consulting his chronometer, he unlocked the padlock and stepped aside.

In a flash the three of them were through the gate moving into the forest at high speed. The first chakra-assisted leap got them up into the canopy so they stopped leaving tracks on the ground. Hinata was between the two boys, and slightly in front, allowing for the best possible coverage with her all-seeing eyes.

Shino signaled danger ahead and to the right, so they smoothly veered to the left. At Hinata's signal they came to a sudden halt on a thick bough that easily supported their combined weight.

"No one is in range of my eyes," Hinata whispered.

"Good," Naruto grunted. "Shino, what was that back there?"

"I saw signs of a large colony of Konoha Forest Leeches," the Aburame answered. "I assumed you wanted to avoid them." He paused. "I don't sense any of the other teams near us," he reported.

Naruto frowned. "How…?"

"I arrived early and seeded the grass in the meeting area with female kikai bugs," Shino explained. "I believe that one or more members of every team have one riding on them now. And as you know, other members of my colonies can-"

"-smell them from a mile away," Naruto finished, grinning. "Shino, you sneaky bastard!" he congratulated his teammate.

"As a reconnaissance team, it would be foolish not to play to our strengths," Shino said as he readjusted his dark glasses.

Author's notes:

Thanks to Runsamok and Bibliophile for their beta efforts!

If you want to know the progress on the next chapter, please visit the blog (link is in my profile). I have progress meters, the occasional article or announcement, and some short fiction that isn't posted anywhere else.

# The Forest of Death

Chapter 13

Naruto flew backwards, his ears ringing from the heavy blow. Arching his back he managed to get his hands and feet in front of him before he smacked into a tree-trunk with stunning force. Bits of bark shot into the air and he barely managed to concentrate enough chakra to stick his hands and feet to the wood before he fell. That freaky grass genin was *strong* .

He shook his head to clear it, scanning the clearing for his teammates and allies. They'd only been traveling an hour before things started to get hairy. They'd avoided one team by using some forest leeches as a distraction, and were circling around to ambush them when Shino's colonies sensed the pheromones of a single kikai bug approaching at high speed.

His super-sneaky teammate planted his kikai on all the other participants, but they should have been together in groups of three. Whether a lone competitor was a threat or an opportunity, they decided to see who it was.

Whatever it was that they had expected to see, it hadn't been Kiba being chased by a giant snake.

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Shino could see that the Inuzuka was clearly winded, and the snake was gaining on him. As the monstrous reptile reared up to strike, Naruto came in from the side, tackling Kiba out of the way. Unfortunately, Akamaru went flying from the sudden change in momentum. But Hinata was a heartbeat behind, and caught the tumbling canine with little more than a startled yelp. The snake, angry at being robbed of its meal, turned to pursue them, but that mistake proved fatal.

Shino dropped out of the trees above the snake, his arms trailing behind him. His hands flexed and a long baton of dull black metal shot out of each sleeve of his jacket. He caught the ends with the sureness of intensive practice and there was a distinct click as narrow, slightly curved blades folded out of each baton. They locked at a right angle to what were now the shafts of the modified kamas, the razor sharp metal pointing downward. With his arms above his plummeting body, they resembled scythe-like wings. Shino's sandals landed on the back of the snake's head, but before it could even register his presence, the blades continued their trajectory, curving into tight arcs as he straightened, his arms snapping downward.

The blades buried themselves in the snake's eyes, ramming deep into the creature's brain. The carcass slammed down, skidding on the ground. Shino extracted his weapons with a sharp jerk, cleaning the blades on the grass before folding them up again. By this time, his teammates had circled back into the clearing with their 'prisoner' – though by this time Kiba had reclaimed his dog.

But not before it had licked Hinata's face several times, to her visible embarrassment.

Naruto let out a low whistle before speaking. "Is that what Misato-sama was teaching you?" he asked, clearly impressed.

Shino nodded as he slid the hafts of his weapons into his sleeves again. With an audible click, the spring-loaded holders locked them into place.

"You have the coolest parents," Naruto muttered as Kiba got his breath back and began to explain. He'd been separated from the rest of Team Seven by some freaky wind attack, only to find himself on some monster snake's dinner menu. As he talked, he began to lead him back to where he'd been attacked.

As they approached the clearing where Team Seven had been separated, Akamaru began to bark and Shino started scanning the greenery around them. "Something is wrong," the boy murmured,

"my colonies are sensing a large amount of chakra being expended up ahead."

"Akamaru senses it too," Kiba added as he patted the puppy that was now burrowing down into his jacket.

"Up above," Hinata whispered, her Byakugan gleaming with the bits of late afternoon sun that filtered down past the leaves.

Shoving a bit of chakra into his legs, Naruto leapt into the canopy in a single bound, the others less than a step behind. Entering a potentially hostile situation at ground level was to be avoided whenever possible. Iruka-sensei's lectures on tactics seemed so *boring* back at the Academy. Now, it was all Naruto could do to keep the remains of his last meal down.

Landing on a thick bough in a stealthy crouch, Naruto scanned the branches. Sasuke and Sakura were there, still alive too. On the other hand, Sakura looked like she'd seen better days and Sasuke had a bloody wound on his thigh. He ignored the slight twinge in his stomach and examined the third person, who was standing on a separate bough.

The Hidden Grass genin stared right at him with a look that was simultaneously bored and contemptuous. Naruto hadn't made more than a whisper of sound when he landed, but he'd still been detected. He swallowed as the stranger's eyes bored into his with a mixture of mild annoyance and more killing intent than even Sabaku no Gaara generated. There was no way this creep was a normal genin.

"More insects here to interfere?" he… it murmured in a peculiarly androgynous voice. "I'll have to talk to my friend about his performance. I send him to kill one, and instead four come back. Very disappointing, but I'm only interested in testing Sasuke's potential. I'm afraid you'll all just have to die. Maybe Sasuke would like to watch, hmmm? Just like before…"

Sasuke launched forward a fraction of a second before Naruto. The Uchiha threw a rapid flurry of punches that the genin blocked with a single hand. The instant before Naruto's fist connected with the back of the freak's head, the other arm whipped around in a backhanded blow that sent him flying into a tree trunk.

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By the time Naruto had regained his bearings, Sasuke was stumbling backwards from the freak's counterattack. Naruto frowned. Since when were Sasuke's eyes red?

The Grass ninja's follow-up was interrupted by a spread of kunai thrown by Kiba. Shino was circling around the fight, no doubt spreading his kikai-bugs, but Hinata was darting in toward the enemy's rear, her hands up for a Jyuuken strike.

Naruto almost shouted for her to stop, but he had to trust that she knew what she was doing. Instead, he put his hands together into the ram seal and summoned a score of kage bunshin, spread around the nearby branches. They instantly began circling as well, waiting for an opening.

Hinata almost made it, but at the last second the freaky genin pivoted and drove a back-kick into her stomach, driving her off her feet so fast she didn't even have a chance to hit any of the tenketsu on his leg. Fortunately, one of Naruto's clones was close enough to catch her, and pivoting, tossed her to a second clone on a higher branch right before the freak's follow-up spin-kick drove through the first clone's chest, making it explode.

"Kage bunshin?" the weirdo said in a voice that was *really* getting on Naruto's nerves. "Maybe you aren't as boring as you look."

"Get *out* of here!" Sasuke yelled, "All of you! He's way above our level!"

"I don't think it will be that simple," Shino said as he threw a pair of kunai. At first, they looked to be underthrown, but when they

embedded in the wood to either side of the Grass ninja's feet, they each had an explosive tag that was already flaring.

The explosion filled the air with smoke, but not flying body parts as Naruto had hoped. He couldn't even smell any blood. When the smoke cleared the bough was gone, but in its place was an even larger snake, with the Grass-nin standing on top of its head.

"Oh *hell* no!" Kiba yelled. "You have *got* to be kidding me!"

Sasuke looked like he was about to explode. He kept glancing at his teammates then shook his head and his eyes faded back into their normal black color. "Fine," he snapped, as he pulled something out of his pouch. "You want our scroll, you can have it."

"No!" Kiba yelled. Even Sakura looked dismayed.

"This is not worth us all getting killed like Tazuna," Sasuke snarled.

"I suppose that goes for us as well," Naruto said, slinging his backpack off his shoulders and rummaging around in it. He knew Hinata and Shino were staring at him, but he just ignored them for the moment. It took a little digging, since he had their scroll in the very bottom of the bag for safe-keeping. He even had to get one of his clones to step around the tree and help him for a moment.

All the while the Grass freak had this amused little smirk on his face, one that made Naruto's knuckles itch. But now was not the time to scratch them on his way-too-pretty-to-be-a-guy face.

Meanwhile, Kiba and Sasuke had gotten into a heated argument, one that culminated in Kiba grabbing the scroll away from Sasuke and tossing it back over his shoulder to Sakura. Amazingly enough, she didn't immediately hand it over to her crush. When Sasuke started to argue again, Kiba told him to shut up and used the index and middle fingers of his right hand to doink him on the forehead.

Sasuke went completely rigid when the slightly taller Inuzuka did this, and for a moment Naruto thought he was going to go after his teammate. Instead, he turned away with a glare.

"Fine," Naruto announced in a loud voice. "My team was just passing by. Here's our scroll. We can go now, right?" He carefully tossed the scroll to the Grass genin.

"That is the way of prey," the weirdo said in response as it weighed the scroll in its hand. "When confronted by a predator, they offer up something in their place, hoping to be left alone."

"But there is no guarantee that you will do that, is there?" Shino asked in a very chill tone. Hinata had regained her breath and moved away from his clone. She was frowning at Naruto, and that bugged him more than a little.

"No, there isn't," the Grass ninja agreed with a leer.

"Good," Naruto announced brightly. "Then I won't feel bad about this."

With a poof, the outer seal on the Heaven scroll disappeared, revealing explosive tags wrapped around a blank scroll. They promptly exploded, enveloping the creepy shinobi in a ball of fire.

The enormous snake let out a hiss that sounded like a boiler explosion and lunged for Naruto's branch. Naruto timed his leap for the last second and managed to vault over the snake's head and land on its neck, chakra gluing the soles of his sandals to the undulating scales.

No sooner did he land than he was in the middle of a hurricane of fists and feet. Effeminate or not, that weirdo still hit as hard as Gai-sensei. Naruto blocked as best he could, but the blows that slipped past to clip his head were making his ears ring. Finally, a kick to the stomach knocked him loose from the snake, and the instant his feet lost contact the snake was rearing back to swallow him.

Naruto barely had time to use a substitution technique with one of his clones to keep from being swallowed. About half his clones were gone now, most of them crushed by the snake thrashing around. As he created more, he saw Kiba and Akamaru make some kind of spiraling wind attack that gouged into the snake's belly scales. Elsewhere, Sakura was throwing kunai at the eyes of the giant reptile, without much luck.

Sasuke, surprisingly enough, had decided to fight once more. He'd thrown some kind of weird shuriken trailing wires around the snake. Not only were they starting to cut into the thick scales, but he was swinging *around* the snake's body, pelting the Grass shinobi with fireballs as he swung overhead. Shino wasn't immediately visible, but a wide section of the snake's scales were beginning to gleam wetly with blood, making Naruto shudder as he recalled Shino mentioning *carnivorous* strains of kikai bugs.

The Grass freak managed to sidestep the worst of the fireballs as Sasuke flashed overhead, so Naruto sent a brace of shuriken his way to keep him off balance. A trio of his clones contributed as well, even though they were quickly dispelled. He noticed that the ninja's left hand, which had been holding the scroll, appeared to be horribly burned, with the skin sloughing off in places, but it didn't seem to slow him down at all.

On Sasuke's next trip around the snake, his wires had wrapped around the thick body, pulling him low enough that he managed to put both feet into the side of the Grass-nin's head. For once, their enemy's eyes widened a little as it was knocked off of the snake and into free-fall. Hinata darted forward out from under cover, leaping at the freak's back, right hand pulled back for what could well be a lethal Jyuuken strike.

Naruto leapt forward as the snake's tail caught Kiba and Akamaru right after they'd gouged a wide trench in the armor-like scales on its underbelly. Two of his clones shot down after them, hopefully in time to break their fall.

There was a visible flash as Hinata sent a massive burst of chakra into the center of their enemy's back. Naruto tried not to think of the mess that must have made out of the freak's insides. The Grass shinobi arched his back, but instead of signifying death throes, it was just the prelude to him reaching back with one inhumanly flexible arm and grabbing Hinata's shoulder. Still in free-fall, he hurled the kunoichi at the tree trunk they were falling past. The recoil allowed him to land on a branch, while Hinata struck the tree with a sickening thud. She fell limply away from the trunk, leaving a splotch of blood on the weathered bark. One of Naruto's clones caught her, but she hung limp in the horrified bunshin's arms.

Naruto let out a scream of rage just as the snake reared up and swallowed him.

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Shino watched as Sasuke leapt after the imposter, his movements even faster than before. Not only was he moving with greater speed, he seemed to anticipate his opponent's actions by a fraction of a second. After flipping backward to escape his opponent's counter, the Uchicha came to rest on a higher branch for a moment, facing in Shino's direction. The gleam of red in his eyes indicated that the class genius had managed to activate his bloodline, the *Sharingan* .

His first colony had managed to get several kikai onto their opponent while his attention was otherwise occupied. However, the anomalous genin didn't even seem to *notice* the chakra they'd managed to drain from him. This meant that either their opponent was another jinchuuriki, which was highly unlikely, or it was a very advanced shinobi, of at least upper jonin rank.

His second colony was working its way towards where he estimated the enormous reptile's vital organs would be located. But their rate of progress did not bode well for a timely end. As it was, without its master guiding it, it did little more than thrash about, trying to shake them off without much success.

His eyes also tracked the progress of the kage bunshin carrying his teammate Hinata. She wasn't moving and the clone's face seemed unusually grave. Shino frowned. He was the last member of Team Eight still in the fight, but his efforts thus far had met with limited success.

"Good, good," the Grass shinobi murmured as he blocked another combo from the Uchiha heir. "Your skills have progressed nicely, all things considered." The overly familiar tone of voice seemed to be calculated to induce discomfort and fear. Shino merely found it to be a childish affectation.

Finally, Sasuke began to show signs of fatigue and his attacks slowed. Shino wondered if he'd ever had to spar someone as inexhaustible as Naruto. The Grass ninja grabbed Sasuke's arm and twisted, locking the joint. His other hand drew back for a strike as Shino soundlessly descended.

The Aburame boy felt a twinge of annoyance as their enemy jerked his head aside an instant before the blade of his kama transited the space it had been occupying. Displaying an inhuman degree of flexibility, the shinobi flipped backwards.

"Yet another insect interferes with my test," it sneered in an insinuating tone.

"Your statement implies that is supposed to be an insult," Shino said as he stepped forward, beginning one of his mother's intermediate attack patterns. The Grass ninja stepped back smoothly, dodging each blow almost as soon as it was launched. He supposed one might consider this frustrating, but he did not deviate from the kata. Overextending a strike in an attempt to catch his elusive foe would only give him an opening to launch a counter-offensive. Instead, Shino stuck with the pattern, the whirling blades giving no opening to his enemy as he steadily forced the unarmed shinobi backward.

"Ah, so those annoying little creatures are yours?" He asked. "Well, it's easy to deal with such… infestations." With that he leapt

backward and up, bringing his hands up to his mouth at the apogee of his flight and sending a dense stream of fire down at Shino.

Shino crossed his weapons in front of himself and pushed as much chakra into them as he could in an attempt to duplicate one of his mother's more advanced techniques. The kamas glowed pale blue for a moment before they were engulfed in flames. However, his hands were not burned and the stream of fire seemed to part around him. When it was over, the wood on either side of him was smoldering, but he was untouched. He did, however, fall to one knee as the sudden expenditure of chakra had left him drained and weakened. For all that, he'd only barely repelled the fire technique.

As soon as he landed, the Grass shinobi was charging again. Shino took a deep breath as he regained his feet, but his foe was intercepted by Sasuke, who flung a double-handful of shuriken. They arced out in a seemingly random pattern, none of them coming close to their target – unless one noticed the wires trailing behind them. Before the Grass shinobi knew what was happening, he'd been bound to an adjacent tree trunk and the Uchiha fired off a massive stream of flames that raced down the wires to engulf his enemy.

Shino felt his eyebrows rise over the tops of his glasses. The katon jutsu had actually burned a hole completely *through* the five meter thick trunk, leaving their foe little more than a smoldering corpse.

And then the corpse darkened and slumped into a pile of mud and Shino felt something strike his back, sending him flying through the air. He held onto his weapons though, and despite acute shortness of breath was able to hook one blade into a passing branch and swing his body up. He landed carefully, then deliberately took a deep breath, wincing as tender ribs flexed. But he was still combat effective, so he waved off Naruto's clones as they moved to help.

Most of the remaining bunshin were circling around Sasuke and the Grass shinobi. Occasionally one would see an opportunity and attack, but most of them were destroyed without landing a blow.

Given the extent of Naruto's taijutsu training, Shino found this worrisome.

When Sasuke was knocked clear again, all the clones dog-piled the Grass shinobi, only to have it use an advanced variation on the substitution technique. In this case, the enemy's body was replaced by a log festooned with explosive tags. The ensuing conflagration destroyed most of the remaining clones.

With no immediate sign of their foe, Shino and Sasuke both headed toward Sakura's perch, a wide bough where the last clones had deposited Hinata, as well as Kiba and Akamaru. All three were unconscious. As they circled around the still-thrashing snake, Sasuke spoke up. "Do you think we should… well, try to recover his body?"

"I don't think that will be necessary," Shino answered.

Sasuke turned to glare at Shino as they landed on the wide bough.

"His clones are still here," Shino murmured. Sasuke's eyes widened slightly and he turned to look at the snake as Shino knelt by his teammate. Hinata had a split lip, a bloody nose, and the whole side of her face was bruised. At best she'd have a mild concussion. Shino looked up at the worried clone hovering protectively over her. "She's badly hurt," Shino said in a flat voice. "If this battle goes on much longer she may die." Which was the literal truth: the young Hyuuga was in no condition to defend herself.

The clone spun toward the snake, its features drawn into a rictus of fury. It had barely taken a step forward before Shino stabbed it in the back with his kamas. The clone dispersed before it could even change expressions.

"What the hell was that for?" Sakura asked, outraged. Standing this close, he could see how watery her eyes were, and wondered if she'd thought things through.

"Naruto told me something interesting at dinner last night," was all Shino could say before the Grass shinobi dropped onto the branch beside them. The bug user barely had time to turn before a two-handed combination sent him skidding along the rough bark. But even as he tried to roll with the blow, his colonies registered a massive chakra spike nearby.

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Sakura felt worse than useless, pulling out her last kunai and taking a wobbly defensive stance over her unconscious classmates. She knew when it was her turn she wouldn't last nearly as long as Shino, who was only now coming to a halt in a small blizzard of bark chips. Sasuke and the weird grass guy were moving so fast she could only see blurs now. It was amazing that Sasuke-kun was even holding him off this long.

That was when the giant snake's head exploded.

A sudden wave of… something… washed over her and she felt her hands trembling. In spite of herself, she found her head turning toward that sickening crunch. Surprisingly, so did the two battling not ten meters from where she stood.

A section of scaly skin at least two meters wide was *missing.* She could just make out a fist sticking up, coated in thick red fluid – with chunks. Before her gorge could finish rising, the whole snake's body began to glow brightly and then *exploded* – just like one of Naruto's clones.

Sakura flinched away from the explosion, just in time to see that Grass weirdo take advantage of the distraction to attack Sasuke-kun. A huge snake shot out of his *sleeve* and wrapped around Sasuke's torso, trapping his arms. The massive body flexed and Sasuke dropped to his knees as the air was forced out of his lungs. Sakura was about to charge forward, hoping her sacrifice would buy Sasuke enough time to escape, when a reddish blur shot past her.

"Get away from them!" something shouted in little more than a guttural roar. Sakura felt her knees turn to water as something, some instinct, made her want to turn and run until she died of exhaustion.

Sakura blinked. Standing in front of her was a rather rumpled-looking Naruto. He was facing away from her, but the hands fisted at his sides were trembling with what had to be rage.

There was a loud crack and the Grass genin went *flying* backwards to slam into the tree trunk hard enough to make an impression on the wood.

The genin flexed its arms and the wood literally exploded around it. "Those eyes," it murmured. "So that's what happened to it."

"Shut up, you bastard!" Naruto growled.

Sakura rubbed at her eyes, but there was nothing wrong with them. Naruto was not only wrapped up in enough chakra to *see* , but it was red. What the hell would make him have red chakra? Was it some weird blood limit she hadn't heard about. Inner-Sakura, the, uhm, more *assertive* voice inside her head, demanded to know how Naruto, of all people could have a blood limit. Then again, Kiba said he'd heard Team Eight had been in an incredible fight on their patrol mission.

As if to prove the point, Naruto charged forward, punching and kicking in a blur of motion. He was moving even faster than before, and this time he was holding his own, at least for the moment. Snapped out of her daze, she spun toward Sasuke-kun, gripping her last kunai.

The last Uchiha in Konoha was getting red in the face as the snake continued to squeeze. It hadn't even tried to bite him; it seemed more like it was playing with him, holding Sasuke down for its weirdo master. But it spun and snapped at her as she approached, the sharp fangs missing her by inches.

"Sa-Sakura," Sasuke gasped. "Get… out of here. Just… go!" he said in a wheezing voice.

Sakura's eyes widened. Did he think she'd just leave him like this? Who did he think she was? Did he think she was a coward? But his voice didn't seem angry or disappointed, just… worried. Afraid. Not of the snake, either. But maybe… for her? On one hand, such a realization warmed her slightly, and gave her hopes for the future. On the other hand, Inner Sakura was pissed. Did he think she was *that* useless?

Sakura scowled, shifting the kunai so it lay under her wrist. She held out her free hand, taunting the snake. This was no different than the slapping game Ino had taught her when they were young. The python took the bait, and lunged at her free hand, even as Sasuke tried to jerk backwards to stop it. Sakura pivoted at the hips, drawing back the empty hand even as the other one shot forward.

The kunai slammed down through the top of the snake's head with a sickening crunch. In a flash, Sasuke was free of the loosening coils. Sakura spared him a glare as he raced past her, trying not to think too hard about what she'd just done. Throwing up would rather spoil the effect.

"Thanks," Sasuke murmured as he charged back into the fight.

As the summoned snake disappeared, Sakura scooped up her now free blade, which she decided was her 'lucky' kunai. Then she spun to follow her Sasuke-kun into battle.

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No matter how angry he was, no matter how much of the freaky red chakra he used, Naruto couldn't seem to get a clean shot at this Grass bastard. The freak's taijutsu was very different from Gai-sensei's Goken, but it was effective nonetheless. It was hard to stay centered too – the anger that came with the chakra seemed to undermine his control at every opportunity.

But it was down to him again. Shino was down and Hinata was unconscious, maybe dying if Shino was right. Kiba was out as well and the rest of Team Seven was struggling. A hard backfist strike clipped his jaw, sending him stumbling backwards. Even as he regained his footing, the bastard was finishing his seals. So fast. And the next instant Naruto was borne aloft on hurricane winds, glancing off of one tree trunk and slamming into another one. Not bothering to use chakra this time, Naruto dug his fingertips into the bark, only slightly surprised when blunt claws found enough purchase to hold him there.

He had to be careful this didn't go too far. There was no telling what might happen if he used too much of this. But so far, this wasn't enough. At least, not enough to put down the bastard that hurt Hinata-chan and Shino.

Sasuke was fighting it now, dodging more than blocking, but still clearly outclassed. Naruto hit the release on his weights and launched himself forward like an arrow.

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Sakura was a step or two behind Sasuke, so she saw everything. The Grass weirdo knocked Sasuke tumbling backwards, and then palmed a kunai. It drew back to throw, clearly not aiming at Sasuke, but at their unconscious comrades.

Sasuke, who was about to charge forward, hesitated for an instant. That fatal indecision gave their enemy time to do a complicated seal with his *other* hand. Sasuke-kun had said that Haku could do seals one-handed, but this seal was not one Sakura had ever seen before. Even as she was racing forward, her muscles locked in place and she was frozen, completely helpless.

"I think it's time to draw this game to a close," the weird shinobi murmured. And then its neck began to stretch, impossibly long, carrying its head forward. As it approached, Sakura could note, to her dismay, that the skin of its *face* was coming off as well, revealing another one beneath it. The mouth yawned wide, just like a snake's,

as the canines enlarged. It dipped toward Sasuke's neck as it was intercepted by a green blur outlined in crimson.

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Naruto didn't know what the hell that thing was trying to do, but knocking its head off seemed like a great idea. Unfortunately, he'd slightly underestimated his own speed, so rather than having his fist impact the freak's skull, he'd just grazed its nose. Still, he had the satisfaction of hearing an audible snap of breaking cartilage, right before something clamped down on his forearm and injected molten steel under his skin.

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Sakura's eyes weren't good enough to see what happened, even if she could have done something. There was a crack, the head snapped back, blood streaming from its nose, and Naruto collapsed to the ground, screaming until he passed out. She could see Sasuke's hand's shake with the effort of trying to move, but he was held just as helpless as her.

The Grass weirdo, head retracted again, glared down at Naruto, and then he said something that made no sense to her. "Well, thab's juds ab well. All I'b done id tick a fuz in their petty liddle bomb. Led the olb man deal wid it if he can." He scowled suddenly, then reached up and grabbed his nose, ignoring the blood streaming down. With an even louder crack that turned Sakura's stomach, the Grass shinobi wrenched it back into position. Then he looked back at Sasuke, smirking at the Uchiha's helpless glare. "Now where were we?"

Sakura could only stare in horror as that awful head extended toward her Sasuke-kun, dipping down to bite at his neck like some creature from folk-tales.

As that freakish head withdrew back towards its body, Sakura finally found her voice. "What did you do to them?" she shrieked. Sasuke groaned and slowly collapsed, twitching violently.

"I gave Sasuke a little goodbye present," the strange shinobi answered. He didn't even glance toward Naruto. "Sasuke will seek me out someday. He will come to me for power."

He smirked at her again as he began to sink down into the wood. "I haven't had this much fun in a long time. I have so much to look forward to now."

With that, the Grass shinobi passed from sight. Sasuke let out a final agonized cry before he fell unconscious, leaving the canopy in silence.

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Shino climbed painfully to his feet. His ribs ached with every breath he took, no matter how shallow.

"Are you all right?" a voice asked hesitantly.

He turned to see Haruno Sakura, who had just moved Naruto and Sasuke's bodies over near Kiba and Hinata, who was finally beginning to stir. Shino nodded and then asked, "What happened? I couldn't see very clearly."

"He… he *bit* them!" she replied with a shudder. "And then they collapsed." She peered at Sasuke's neck and then carefully pushed up Naruto's sleeve. "It left some weird design on their skin as well."

Shino frowned and carefully made his way over to see. "It appears to be a seal of some sort," he observed. "But I have no idea as to its purpose."

"It can't be good though," Sakura fretted.

"That is a valid assumption," Shino agreed. "Logically, we should withdraw from the exam. We have four disabled allies and only the two of us currently conscious. I myself am injured and not fully effective."

Sakura's lips pushed together mulishly as she shook her head. "I… I don't think Sasuke or Kiba would like that," she said after a moment.

Shino nodded slightly. "For that matter, my teammates are also highly motivated to do well in the exam. While I am unsure as to the status of Naruto and Sasuke, my allies indicate that Hinata and Kiba should be awake soon."

Sakura's head came up with an almost audible snap. "But you said Hinata was *dying* ."

"I said she might die," Shino corrected. "And if the fight continued on much longer, she may very well have been killed while she was unconscious."

"But… you told Naruto… I mean his clone..." Sakura asked, frowning.

"My teammate doesn't always think things through, particularly when he is anxious about a friend," Shino explained while minutely straightening his glasses. "I surmised that information would provide sufficient motivation to… expedite his release from the summons."

"What did he do?" Sakura finally asked. "That red chakra… is it a blood limit or something?"

"You will have to ask Naruto," Shino said firmly. "That information is confidential, and not mine to disseminate."

"Okay," Sakura replied in a clearly dubious tone. "So what do we do now?"

"I will recover Naruto's equipment," Shino replied. "I believe he has some smelling salts in his backpack. If we can revive Kiba and Hinata, we should be able to move the others to a more defensible locale. At that point we can see if there is a change in Naruto or Sasuke's condition."

Sakura nodded.

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Hinata couldn't ever recall her head hurting this much before. Not even after the worst of her family's special training sessions. One eye refused to open all the way, and the skin around it felt puffy and tight. Her mouth was foul with the taste of blood and her upper lip was caked with it. Her body ached as well, feeling like her bones had been pulled apart, ground up, and then shoved back into her abused flesh. She supposed she should be grateful to even be alive, but she didn't think it was possible to hurt this much and not be dying.

All that went right out of her head when she saw who was lying on the tree limb next to her.

"N-Naruto-k-kun!" she lisped, her swollen lips making her own voice sound alien in her ears.

Shino leaned back, discarding the sachet he'd been holding under her nose, as she sat up. She ignored Sakura's curious looks as she quickly laid her hand on her somnolent friend's chest. The steady rise and fall of his respiration reassured her, even as her head reminded her why sitting up quickly was a *bad* idea.

Shino handed her a red pill and a blue pill. "I've recovered our packs," he said quietly. "Your chakra is low enough that it's advisable to take the soldier pill, and the analgesic is definitely warranted." Farther down the bough, Hinata could see Sakura start ministering to Kiba, who in turn attended to Akamaru.

Shino returned to peering into the largest pack. "I don't know why Naruto brought the collapsible tents, but it is a good thing that he did so."

Naruto and Sasuke showed no signs of waking, so they were carefully bundled up into sections of tent, hoisted by their teammates. Hinata was a little shaky at first, but she insisted on helping to carry her friend.

This, of course, meant that Kiba insisted on carrying Sasuke by himself.

After a very cautious descent, they reached the forest floor. Shino dispatched a fair number of flying kikai bugs, and a few moments later declared the area safe. He led them with a sureness that had Sakura and Kiba a little confused, but he didn't stop to explain until after they were getting settled into a surprisingly spacious cave left by a partially uprooted tree.

"Some of my allies can comprehend simple images, and transmit back to me rough impressions of what they have seen," he said without preamble as he helped her settle Naruto down onto the soft earth. "I propose a temporary alliance, at least until our teammates have recovered. Each team will keep their own scrolls and act together for mutual defense. At the moment, both teams are weakened, and many will see us as easy prey."

"I suppose we can help you guys out," Kiba drawled, "right, Sakura?"

Sakura winced at the Inuzuka's arrogant tone.

"I should probably point out," Shino replied, straightening his glasses in a manner that Hinata had come to associate with him being irritated, "that the only person to actually strike that false genin and still be conscious at this time is Hinata."

Hinata swallowed as all three of her classmates turned to stare at her.

"A-ano, I only hit him by surprise, I-in the back…" she explained.

"You are a ninja, correct?" Shino asked.

"Uh, yes, Shino-kun," Hinata answered, dropping her eyes.

"Then the fact that you struck from surprise in no way diminishes your accomplishment, correct?" Shino continued.

"Yes, Shino-kun," Hinata answered, her voice more sure this time.

"That said, the sentiment Naruto ascribed to your… taijutsu tutor… is an admirable one," Shino concluded. "It is only appropriate that we offer assistance to fellow shinobi of the leaf. While I believe it would be more prudent to withdraw from the exam, given the circumstances, I will abide by the desire of the majority to continue. If anything, it will be a fair test of our ability to cope in adverse circumstances."

Kiba frowned and grunted. Sakura turned to Hinata with a questioning look.

"Shino thinks Konoha shinobi should stick together," the Hyuuga girl explained. She supposed she was just used to the way her friend spoke – he was usually laconic around strangers.

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Their first night in the Forest of Death passed quietly, though it was still very tense. After a short meal of ration bars and summoned water they split the night into shifts in which two stood watch at all times. Hinata's watch was set for the latter part of the night so she'd have time to recover.

While Kiba promptly went to sleep, curled up with his dog, Sakura and Shino used the remaining daylight to set up traps in the area surrounding their refuge.

For her part, Hinata tried to sleep, but found it difficult. Both Sasuke and Naruto began to tremble slightly as their unnatural slumber became increasingly agitated. Both appeared to be running fevers. Though wet cloths applied to their foreheads did little to help, Hinata and Sakura kept reapplying them – if only to have something to do, the Hyuuga realized.

Hinata had been through many unpleasant experiences, many of them related to her family. So it was a surprise to realize that the

worst feeling she'd ever experienced in her short life was caused by Uzumaki Naruto.

It was this feeling of profound *helplessness* that she couldn't stand. She supposed she'd felt something similar when her mother had died, but that had happened long enough ago that she couldn't clearly remember that awful day. But now… she could look at Naruto-kun's face, contorting in pain, and feel like she wanted to die. He was *hurting* , and she could do nothing to stop it. She tried to remember her father's face the day her mother died, wondering if he had felt like this… but she couldn't recall ever seeing him at all. She remembered the branch family servants who came to her room with the news, the old woman who held her as she cried, promising she'd tell no one of her lack of composure.

It was sad how she can remember that old woman's face more clearly than her mother's.

Hinata's breath caught in her throat as she followed her thoughts to their logical conclusion. She didn't just *admire* her teammate.

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With the light failing, Shino and Sakura armed the last of the kunai traps and returned to the cave. Their task took longer than expected due to the simply *ridiculous* number of extra kunai and shuriken Naruto was carrying in his pack. But Shino was determined to make their lair as secure as possible, so they used most of them as ammunition for their traps.

Surprisingly, Haruno Sakura seemed to have a gift for designing and setting up traps. Her plans and layouts indicated that she possessed a grasp of tactics and spatial awareness not usually found in kunoichi of her age. This was very much at odds with the persona she'd projected at the Konoha Ninja Academy, where Shino's memories of her were primarily those of a squealing fan-girl chasing after Sasuke along with the rest of her peers.

Perhaps she had changed, or his initial estimate of her had been as flawed as his opinion of Naruto. In either event, her stock in his estimation rose, even as the sun set.

As they returned to the cave, she displayed yet another net improvement. Hinata had finally managed to fall asleep, but had apparently done so while tending to Naruto. She was curled up on the ground next to her teammate, her head pillowed on his left shoulder. His right forearm, with its peculiar wound, was still propped up on his stomach, the sleeve pushed up to the elbow.

"Awww…" Sakura whispered. She silently made her way to the packs and retrieved an all-weather blanket that she carefully draped over the indigo-haired kunoichi. Looking up at Shino, she silently gestured that they should move back to the entrance.

Once there, Shino silently checked with his allies. The immediate vicinity was still clear of any hostile presence. He looked back when Sakura quietly cleared her throat.

"She really likes him, doesn't she?" the pink-haired girl asked. "Hinata, I mean."

Shino just nodded, remembering Haruno's disparaging attitude toward Naruto that evening at Ichiraku's.

"That's so sweet," Sakura whispered with a wistful smile. "He doesn't have a clue, does he?" she asked.

"I think he has some inkling, but not explicitly, no," Shino answered in a guarded tone.

Sakura sighed. "She seems like such a nice girl, I hope he doesn't hurt her."

"Uzumaki Naruto is constitutionally incapable of acting with malice aforethought," Shino declared with what he admitted was some heat.

Sakura frowned at him, but then shook her head. "No, I suppose not. Not intentionally, anyway."

"That's an… unexpected admission, coming from you," Shino replied.

Sakura actually blushed a little. "I've… had a few things pointed out to me. There have been times that Naruto really got on my nerves, but I haven't always been fair towards him either." She sighed. "I'm trying to be a better person," she admitted.

"That is… an admirable goal," Shino allowed.

"So…" Sakura asked, clearly wishing to change the subject, "how far away can your bugs sense trouble?"

Shino inclined his head politely and began his standard lecture on kikai bugs and their capabilities.

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By sunrise, Hinata's head had stopping aching quite so badly. Her face was still a mess though, and it even hurt to blush when she woke up with her unbruised cheek resting on Naruto-kun's shoulder. To her disappointment, both he and Sasuke's conditions were unchanged.

Shino said nothing when she'd relieved him at midnight, and she'd fortunately risen before Kiba. Sakura, on the other hand, gave her a smile as she headed back into the cave to rest. Despite her misgivings regarding the kunoichi's previous behavior, Hinata felt Sakura was being sincere.

A few moments later a yawning Kiba joined her at the mouth of the cave. Shino gave her a brief summary of the traps that had been set, and she was able to double-check them using her Byakugan. Though Shino was sleeping now, he'd assured her that his colony had been instructed to wake him if his pickets encountered anything. Just how that wake-up would occur wasn't something she really

wanted to think about. In the meantime, she would also periodically use her eyes to scan for intruders that managed to elude everything else.

Kiba nodded as she explained their precautions, and then yawned again. "You two are pretty useful to have around," he said with grudging respect. He hesitated, and then added, "My mom was pretty impressed with your team, and that's not easy to do. I… appreciate you all helping us yesterday."

Hinata swallowed and struggled to keep a blush away from her battered face. "We're all Konoha shinobi," she replied. "It's only right that we should help each other."

Kiba shrugged as he scratched the back of Akamaru's head. "I don't think the older genin teams feel that way. Maybe the rookies from our class. And that other team, is that Hyuuga your cousin or something?"

Hinata nodded, not really wanting to think about meeting Neji out here in direct competition. He seemed to resent both her and Naruto, albeit for different reasons.

After a while, they just sat in a semi-comfortable silence, using their enhanced senses to stand watch.

It wasn't until late morning that their perimeter was breached.

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When Naruto gained awareness of himself again, he was lying in what appeared to be a basement. He slowly sat up, wincing as blood began to flow into areas that had been cut off by the hard concrete beneath him. His right arm felt like it was on fire, and he could barely move the shoulder or flex his fingers.

There was no sign of Hinata or Shino, nor of Team Seven. Had they been captured? Had he? Somehow, he didn't think they were anywhere near.

The air felt damp; like this place had been flooded and only recently had the water receded. The lights were muted, and the illumination they cast lent a gray pallor to everything. At first Naruto thought there were circulating fans that ran roughly, but soon he realized that the sound he was hearing was too irregular to be mechanical.

Turning around, there was no break in the patterns of hallways that surrounded him, but the sounds seemed to be slightly louder in one direction. With nothing better to do, he slowly walked toward the source of the noise.

As he shuffled along, he kept trying to flex the fingers of his right hand. They barely moved and the pain grew worse. Looking down at his forearm, he could see a weird black seal that looked like three tomoe in a spiral. The skin around them was angry and red, and he swore a faint ribbon of vapor appeared to be rising from the center of the design.

The further Naruto walked toward the source of the noise, the more uneasy he became. It was a sensation that was both disturbing and oddly familiar. It was a little like being around Gaara again, but not quite. If anything, it was even worse.

Finally, the hallway opened into a room with a very high ceiling. Dominating the far wall was a huge metal gate with vertical bars at least fifteen meters high. The two halves of the portal were closed, but there was no bar or lock. Instead a thin strip of paper held the massive gates together. The paper seal was adorned with a single kanji character that was, oddly enough, the symbol for 'seal'.

As Naruto peered at the seal, that oppressive feeling spiked again and an enormous pair of red eyes appeared over a mouth full of huge teeth. The features were shrouded in a haze of red chakra and Naruto began to put the pieces together.

"Boy, come closer," a deep voice rumbled, resonating in Naruto's bones.

"I think I'll just stay right here," Naruto answered in a wary tone.

A set of gigantic claws moved out of the darkness, sliding between the bars of the gate. As one, they slammed down onto the concrete, the points scarring the unyielding floor.

"I'd like to eat you, but this gate won't open," the voice growled. "Damnable seal."

That only confirmed Naruto's suspicions. "Well I'm not real happy about having you here either, asshole!" He glared right into eyes that were bigger than his body as a lifetime's worth of frustration and anger filled his mind with flames. "If you'd just had the decency to freaking die when the Yondaime kicked your *ass* , I wouldn't have been putting up with crap from everyone as long as I can remember!"

The huge eyes blinked. Whatever reaction Naruto had been expecting, it wasn't the rusty chuckle that echoed from behind the gate. "You didn't mind it when you were using *my* chakra to save those two weaklings you run around with."

Naruto scowled. "Well, if you know that, then you know that one of those *weaklings* is probably the only reason I didn't slit my wrists afterward. Practically every crappy thing that's happened in my life is because of *you* , you damned fox." Hinata had been badly hurt getting a solid hit on that freak – he wasn't going to let anyone call her a weakling. He just hoped she was okay, wherever she was.

"You've got a lot of nerve saying that," the Kyuubi no Kitsune growled, "considering that it was your precious *Yondaime* that ruined both our lives with his little *technique.* "

Naruto bit back his first response. That was at least one lecture of Iruka-sensei's that he'd paid close attention to. Despite all that had happened, the story of the Fourth had only strengthened his desire to become Hokage some day. "And whose village were you destroying at the time?" he asked sarcastically.

"That's a long story, you hairless monkey," the demon growled. "But we have more immediate problems. Look at your arm."

Naruto glanced down at his paralyzed forearm. The seal was burning now, covered in purple and black flames, and the pain was getting worse.

"You managed to let my den get marked with *another* seal, you careless buffoon," the Kyuubi growled.

"What the hell is it doing?" Naruto asked nervously. The fact that the demon actually sounded a little worried was setting off all kinds of warning bells in his mind.

"It's trying to tap into your chakra coils. It seems to be designed to strengthen the wearer by adding its own chakra to the body's inner coil system. I'm not sure where it's pulling that black chakra from, but its bad news."

"How is more chakra bad?" Naruto asked cautiously.

"It's… not… normal chakra. Portions of it seem to be gravitating toward your pea-sized brain. In addition to whatever it might try to do to your alleged mind, your coils are already under stress from holding your chakra as well the fractions of my chakra that leak out of this cursed seal. There isn't room for a third chakra in here." The huge lips twisted into a feral sneer. "You don't want to explode, do you?"

Naruto shook his head slowly. "So what can we do about it?"

"Well, if you hadn't wimped out and gone unconscious, I'd suggest just cutting the arm off at the elbow," the fox suggested. "Oh, stop making faces. I bet I could grow it back. Eventually. Anyway, due to your pitiful pain threshold, we have to do this the *hard* way."

"The hard way?" Naruto asked, feeling a bit ill. If cutting off his arm wasn't the hard way, he wasn't sure he wanted to know what was.

"I push as much chakra as I can past *this* seal and hope *that* seal gives before your inner coils explode," the demon explained.

Naruto felt his mouth drop open. "That sounds like a really bad idea to me!" he protested.

"I'm not overjoyed either. If you die, I die. But as much as being inside of you is an exercise in torment," the voice continued, "being inside of you while you are being controlled by whoever put that seal on you would be worse."

"How do I know I can trust you?" Naruto finally asked.

"Can you afford not to?" the voice asked as the eyes narrowed. "If you fall under that seal's influence, who do you think will be in the most danger?"

Naruto took a deep breath and let it out. The pain in his arm was growing worse by the second. "What do I do?" he asked.

"Just stand there and don't resist," the voice replied, the deep reverberations dropping away as the volume lowered. "I need you to act as the conduit for this," it continued as a flood of red chakra began to seep out from under the gate, heading toward Naruto's feet.

"And try not to die," the Kyuubi's voice concluded as the chakra reached Naruto and his world exploded in agony.

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Hinata heard Shino stirring in the cave behind her even as her eyes picked up a trio of fast moving shapes through the canopy. Shino had roused Sakura and made it to the mouth of the cave when the first traps went off.

Amid the twangs and whooshes there were muted curses, indicating that some of the projectiles had found their mark. Finally, there was a

loud yell of frustration followed by a cry of *Zankūkyokuha* as a copse of trees near the mouth of the cave was obliterated.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" a female voice asked in a plaintive tone. "That note might not have been from sensei."

"Yes I'm sure, Kin," a deeper voice answered. "I can feel the echoes of a cave from my ground waves. That's probably where they are hiding like little rodents."

"That's good enough for me, Dosu," another male voice replied. A thin man wearing a tan tunic over a grey camouflage jumpsuit stepped out into the clearing. Hinata didn't need to see the symbol on his forehead to recognize one of the sound genin they'd encountered before the first exam.

"Yo," he said in an arrogant drawl, "we're here for the Uchiha."

"Well you can't have him!" Sakura snapped, clearly incensed by his cavalier attitude.

"We're here to kill him," the bulkier leader in the grey tunic, bandages, and fur mantle said as he joined his subordinate, "a few more bodies doesn't really matter to us, does it Zaku?"

The skinnier sound-nin shook his head, smiling.

"Why are we even bothering to talk to these brats?" the long-haired sound kunoichi asked as she joined them.

Hinata glanced at Shino, who didn't even open his mouth. She knew from experience that he'd have kikai bugs seeded all around the clearing. It was only a matter of time before they began draining the chakra from the sound nins.

Then Dosu stuck out his right arm and rapidly spun in a circle. "We were warned about your tricks, freak," he snarled. "But it's not that

hard to figure out the resonance frequency of your bugs' shells, is it?"

Kiba and Akamaru both let out low cries, Kiba grabbing at his ears as Akamaru whined and put his paws over his ears. Shino winced visibly as well and Hinata wondered how many of his allies he'd just lost. He'd have to pull the remainder inside his body as well, if he wanted to protect them.

Her feet were in motion before she even finished that thought. Her audacity appeared to have caught the sound nins off guard, and she was only a couple of steps from the leader, her hand drawn back for a Jyuuken strike, when a solid wall of air sent her flying. Hinata rolled when she struck the ground and flowed back onto her feet to see Zaku moving his open palms to point at her.

Hinata had just registered the presence of the metallic air nozzles embedded in his palms when he shouted *Zankuha* and a ripple of air began racing towards her. She leapt to the side as the shockwaves demolished a tree where she'd been standing. Glancing back toward the cave, she could see Shino charging out with his kamas unfolded, followed by Sakura as Kiba struggled to his feet. She hadn't heard the ultrasonic waves the Sound leader had used to destroy Shino's kikai bugs, but evidently Inuzuka had a wider hearing range than normal. Only now it was proving to be a liability.

Kin began throwing senbon needles at Sakura as Shino stalked toward Dosu. He couldn't use most of his jutsus until that one was disabled. Unfortunately, that left her facing an opponent with a strong long-ranged attack.

Hinata might ordinarily have been concerned, since she was facing someone who was not a good match-up for her skills. But she had no doubt what would happen if they made it into the cave while her Naruto-kun lay helpless. Both of the unconscious boys would be dead in moments. That was not something that would happen while she had breath in her body.

So she began stalking her opponent, carefully dodging his attacks as she worked her way closer and closer. Zaku's mounting frustration as he continued to miss her seemed to distract him from his growing peril, a realization that brought a slight smile to her cracked lips.

Remembering Kurenai-sensei's lectures about maintaining situational awareness, she spared a glance for her teammates as she rolled away from another hurricane blast.

Sakura seemed to be having some trouble with her opponent. She'd been struck in the leg by one of the needles, but her movements suggested that she was at least a little disoriented. Hinata hoped the needles weren't poisoned.

Shino, on the other hand, had managed to close with his foe. His weapons flashed in the morning light as they spun in his hands. Dosu was blocking with two kunai and his right forearm, which appeared to be armored, but he was unable to counterattack and his uniform was dotted here and there with blood from minor wounds. Shino-kun seemed quite intent on avenging his fallen allies.

Hinata dodged another blast, moving in even closer, when Kiba leaped out of the bushes and slammed into Zaku. The sound nin let out a grunt as they slammed into the ground with Kiba on top. The Inuzuka was moving a kunai toward the sound nin's throat, either to take him prisoner or kill him, when the whole point became moot. Hinata didn't even have time to shout a warning as Zaku got one of his upturned palms onto Kiba's stomach and blasted him into the air.

She charged forward as a second blast caught Kiba in the air, tearing off a piece of his jacket and sending him tumbling toward Shino and Dosu's battle.

Fortunately, Shino heard Kiba's grunt of pain, and stepped back before his swinging blades accidentally eviscerated his ally.

Unfortunately, that seemed to be the opening Dosu was waiting for. The sound nin quickly swung his right arm around in front of him and

Hinata could almost *see* the ripples coming off of it and converging on Kiba and Shino. Kiba let out a strangled cry as they converged on his head, making blood shoot out of his ears as his eardrums ruptured. Shino bent forward as the sound waves slammed into his torso with a visceral crunch. He barely retained hold of his weapons as a bright gout of blood exploded from his mouth.

Zaku watched this as well, and didn't realize her proximity or his own peril until the last second. As Hinata made her strike, he was just raising one palm to stop her. She launched the index and middle fingers of her right hand, wreathed with a visible glow of chakra, at her foe. At the last instant she diverted her strike, sending the chakra spike lancing *into* the nozzle that was just being brought to bear. The results were spectacular.

The back of Zaku's hand exploded into a spray of aerosol blood, coating his face and blinding him, even as his other hand came up and fired blindly at her. Unfortunately, as close as she was, she couldn't completely avoid his counterstrike, and was launched back toward the cave.

Hinata struck the ground hard, knocking the wind out of her. She made it to her hands and knees in time to see Sakura catch Kin in the side of the head with a very solid punch that dropped the sound kunoichi to her knees. But the next instant a kunai thrown by Dosu buried itself in Sakura's upper arm while another ripped through her hair, narrowly missing her skull.

But neither that nor the screamed curses of Zaku could distract Hinata from what was happening inside the cave. Landing where she did, she had a clear view of both Sasuke and Naruto. Both were wreathed in dark purple chakra that flickered and waved like some sickly fire.

Suddenly Sasuke stood up, a black silhouette amidst the purple flames, but with blotches of glowing red oozing across his skin like flowing embers. The flames around Sasuke died down a little, but glowing red marks on his skin remained, eventually fading to black.

Naruto jerked awake and screamed as the purple flames around him spiked even higher. He made it up to his hands and knees. Despite his violent trembling, Hinata could see that the seal on his arm was replaced by a jet of purple-black fire that extended nearly a foot from his skin. With her Byakugan active, she could see that his coil system was now under attack, with red chakra fighting black chakra, and blue chakra caught in the middle. His tenketsu were opening on their own and vomiting out mixed and contaminated chakra. His coils heaved and began to crack.

Naruto was dying.

"Naruto!" Hinata gasped. She didn't think she'd even spoken aloud, but he looked up, directly into her horrified eyes.

And he smiled.

"Hinata… chan…" he groaned as he sat back and gripped his forearm with his left hand, right around the seal. He took a deep agonized breath. Then he pulled a kunai from his pouch and slammed it into his forearm, directly into the seal.

There was a loud explosion that rocked Hinata backwards. It even made Sasuke step back as his chakra flames wavered under the onslaught. He turned to look back at Naruto as the kunai was ripped from his fingers and the half-melted fragments were imbedded in the wall of the cave.

The purple-black chakra expanded outward in a shockwave that covered the clearing. It was just blind luck that Sasuke's aura blocked Hinata from the worst of it; because she could see the others shiver and twitch as it passed over them. The tongue of flame extruding from Naruto's forearm abruptly switched from purple to red flames as his aura became completely red. And to Hinata's relief, his chakra coils stopped pulsating like they wanted to rupture and explode.

Sasuke nodded and stalked out of the cave, his altered skin making him look more than a little monstrous. His roving eyes stopped moving when he saw Sakura wrenching the kunai from her arm. "Sakura," he said in an eerie voice. "Who the hell did that to you?"

Sakura's eyes widened but she didn't answer. Hinata was a bit distracted herself as Naruto slowly walked out of the cave. He reached out and oh so gently let his fingertips touch a fresh scrape on her cheek. "Who?" he asked in a far too calm voice. He looked over toward Zaku, who was wrapping a bandage around his wounded hand.

Sakura seemed to remember that they were still in a fight, because she quickly turned to check on Dosu and Zaku. Sasuke's eyes narrowed as he seemed to recognize the crumpled form of his teammate at Dosu's feet.

Both Naruto and Sasuke seemed to disappear as Zaku fired a massive blast with his uninjured hand. Dosu was just starting to swing his right arm around when Sasuke appeared behind him. The number one student of his class reached over, grabbed each side of the sound-nin's head and gave a sharp twist. When he let go, Dosu dropped to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut, blood pouring from the corpse's nose and mouth. Zaku was pivoting for another blast when Naruto appeared beside him, grabbed his wrist in a chakra-wreathed fist, and crushed it utterly.

Sasuke glanced over at Naruto, and then began to stalk toward the remaining sound ninja, his face impassive and his tread as implacable as an executioner's.

Sakura seemed to realize what he planned because she lurched forward at the last second and wrapped her arms around Sasuke, pleading with him to stop. "Sasuke!" she finally whispered, "what's wrong with you?"

"I… I feel pretty strong right now. He gave that to me. Now I can truly be an avenger." Sasuke glanced down at a smear of blood on

Sakura's leg. "Now it's her turn."

"You are not the Sasuke I know!" Sakura said in a tearful voice. "Just… just stop this. Please, Sasuke?"

Kin had finally recovered at this point, and looked like she'd rather be semiconscious again. She was visibly cowering until Sasuke finally grunted. "All right, Sakura," he quietly acquiesced. But when he looked back at Kin his voice was hard again. "Get your teammates and go. Now." The black marks slowly began to fade from his skin.

Naruto turned to glare at the now-disarmed Zaku. "You'd better help her," he added with a glare.

It was only after they left that anyone noticed that, accidentally or intentionally, they'd left behind their scroll.

Author Notes:

A big thank you to my betas, Runsamok and Bibliophile!

As always, progress on the current chapters can be found on my blog.

This was a fairly combat-intensive chapter, but I managed to sneak a little character development in between the fights.

This story doesn't really have a benevolent Kyuubi in it. The nine-tailed demon is, however, a pragmatist. It knows its remaining existence will end when Naruto dies, and even if he could survive the Cursed Seal, Orochimaru's lackeys have an abysmal life expectancy. So… it will cooperate when the choice is between that and dying.

# Preliminary Mayhem

Chapter 14

Naruto scowled as both teams gathered themselves after the battle. Everyone looked like they'd been beaten with a stick. A large, dirty stick. The dark marks on Sasuke's skin had faded away, but the boy still seemed a little… off… to Naruto.

Kiba groaned and rolled onto his side before vomiting. Naruto wrinkled his nose at the smell. Akamaru whined piteously as he circled his partner. Shino was only just beginning to sit up, and Sakura was clinging to the Uchiha like a terrified barnacle.

"Crap," Naruto muttered and went back to the cave, looking for his backpack. He pulled out his partially depleted first aid kit, wondering where all his spare kunai had gone. When he emerged from the cave, Shino was shakily climbing to his feet with Hinata's assistance.

They'd tended the worst of their wounds when Kiba, his equilibrium finally restored, looked around and frowned at the scroll the sound team had left behind. "That looks like an Earth scroll," he said as he slowly climbed to his feet and spat. "We got a Heaven scroll, so we could use this," he said carefully. "What about you guys?"

"Looks like you got lucky then," Naruto replied glibly. "Good thing, too, because I don't think your team could handle the Konohamaru Corps right now."

Kiba whirled around, instantly furious. Naruto noticed that nothing set off the Inuzuka faster than an insult to his 'pack'. "You want me to 'handle' your loser butt, Uzumaki?" the larger boy snarled.

"You'd have to catch me!" Naruto shot back with a cheeky grin and dived into the underbrush.

Hinata was more than a little perturbed with her teammate. Sure, it was nice that he was bouncing back so quickly from his ordeal, but this wasn't really the place or time for him to revert to his academy behavior. She wondered for a moment if he'd been struck on the head during either of the last two battles.

Shino-kun let out a quiet sigh as Kiba chased Naruto out of the clearing. She was tempted to activate her eyes to track them, but her head ached abominably, so she refrained since they were still within earshot.

Not that it was hard to do – they were making a lot of noise out there. Evidently a full-blown wrestling match had ensued.

"Can't you control him?" Shino and Sakura both said simultaneously. Both of them looked sharply at each other and Sasuke muttered something that sounded like "Idiots!" under his breath.

After a couple of minutes, a somewhat rumpled-looking Naruto was hurled back into the clearing. He shot to his feet as Kiba stalked toward him. The Inuzuka, however, was intercepted by a pink-haired kunoichi that had evidently had enough of his foolishness. She let him know this verbally and by grabbing his ear and yanking it hard enough to turn him around.

Akamaru whined in sympathy as he trotted along behind his humbled partner.

Naruto stuck his tongue out at Kiba, but refrained from further childishness when Hinata grasped his forearm. Shino didn't say or do anything, but his irritation was a palpable weight in the air.

However, the Aburame didn't make a habit of voicing his displeasure in front of others. It wasn't until Team Seven had made their goodbyes and left for the tower that he spoke.

"Your pupils are not dilated, and I do not recall our opponent utilizing any psychotropic chemical attacks, so I would appreciate an

explanation of your behavior," Shino said, his frustration showing in how he bit off the words.

"What do you mean?" Naruto asked. "The scrolls?"

"Yes. The scrolls," Shino replied. "I presume there is some reason you wanted Team Seven to think we had an Earth Scroll?"

"Yeah," Naruto replied. "If I didn't, they might not have taken the scroll those Sound jerks left. Sasuke is pretty proud – he wouldn't want to think we are doing them any favors."

Shino let out another microscopic sigh. If Hinata's hearing were any less acute, she wouldn't have caught it at all. "What I do not comprehend is why you are so adamant that they get the scroll, seeing as how we had equal need for it. I understand that Maito Gai wished that we would support comrades in need, but I think this goes beyond what he intended."

Naruto frowned for a moment, and Hinata realized that he hadn't even considered Gai-sensei's words in that context. "That isn't it at all," he said as he lowered his voice and glanced around. He gave Hinata a very direct look.

Despite her aching head, Hinata activated her blood limit and did a *very* quick scan of the area. No one was within her range, so she cautiously shook her head.

"Okay, I wanted them to get the scroll so they could get Sasuke to a medic-nin *fast* ," Naruto whispered.

"He seemed all right when they left," Shino observed.

Naruto shook his head. "I don't think so. I broke the seal that freak put on me, but Sasuke… he did something else. It's still on him, and whatever it does it's nasty enough to scare *my prisoner* into helping me get rid of it."

"Your… prisoner?" Hinata asked in a shaky voice.

Naruto nodded. "While I was out, it paid me a visit, like inside my mind. I could see it, trapped behind the seal, and it was as big a jerk as I imagined it would be. But it could feel that thing on my arm and it said it would start to influence me the longer it was on me. It didn't want to be imprisoned any worse than it already was, so it helped me push the chakra to tear it off." Naruto paused. "I supposed it considered putting up with just me to be less of a pain. Anyway, the sooner they get him to the medics and the Hokage, the better. When Kiba followed me into the bushes, I grabbed him and used some clones to make noise. I told him to get his team to the tower and tell that Kakashi guy about the seal immediately."

"Why didn't you just tell them directly?" Hinata asked, puzzled.

Naruto shrugged. "Sasuke wouldn't believe 'dead last' if I told him the sky was blue. Sakura will always back him up too. And… I don't really want to talk too much about how I found out about the seal."

Shino nodded. "That was… impressive."

Naruto blinked.

"I agree with both your reasoning and your methodology. We are under less of a time constraint than our allies, whether they know it or not, and will have other opportunities to acquire an Earth scroll."

Hinata couldn't help but smile at the pleased blush that colored Naruto-kun's cheeks as they resumed their journey.

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After that freaky grass weirdo, and the Hidden Sound assassination squad, running into a group of Hidden Mist genin with all of Team Eight awake and functional was… a bit of a relief.

Hinata tapped her pant leg with two fingers, signaling that she'd sensed a low-powered Genjutsu trying to affect them. Naruto

counted ten steps before bringing his hands together and concentrating his chakra. "Naruto Majutsu: Chakra Pulse!" he murmured as he released a highly restrained surge.

This one only covered the immediate vicinity, rather than half of Konoha. No sense scaring the visitors.

The air seemed to waver, and a trio in light grey bodysuits and dark blue cloaks shimmered into view. Naruto had to squint to identify the village symbols on their hitai-ite, and realized that the air was growing hazy.

Naruto was fairly sure the haze was caused by moisture gathering in the air, but he wasn't prepared to take any chances. "Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!" he snarled as he formed the ram seal. There was an explosion of smoke and a dozen clones materialized between Team 8 and the Mizu-Genin team.

"Manabu!" the slightly taller one in the middle snapped. The one on the right, who wore dark glasses, brought his hands together for seals and four clones of him appeared in front of Naruto's clones and attacked.

The clone war was short and one-sided. However, when the enemy clones were hit, they dissipated into masses of frothy water with an unhealthy green tinge to it. When the liquid fell to the ground, it splashed everything in the immediate vicinity and proceeded to eat smoking holes in it. Taking out the four clones cost Naruto six of his, dispelled by the acidic spray.

While this was happening, the Mist ninja on the left drew Naruto's attention. The skinny boy's arms were moving under his cloak, but instead of forming seals, Naruto saw that his hands were digging into large containers strapped to each leg. His hands whipped forward, hurling four small green spheres at Naruto.

Naruto's shuriken were in the air before he even thought about it, and intercepted three of the spheres, causing them to burst open

and spray more of the green gunk on his remaining clones. He didn't need the memories after they exploded to know that it was more of that caustic liquid. He ducked under the last sphere and it struck the ground in front of Shino and Hinata, spraying them with its acidic contents.

Naruto smirked as the two henged clones behind him exploded.

Three Hinatas charged out of the undergrowth at the grenade-thrower. He spun, throwing more of his acid spheres. The two left-most Hinatas kept running, and the spheres sailed harmlessly through the insubstantial bunshin. The real Hinata dived forward into a rolling somersault that Naruto, quite indignantly, remembered using on *her* when they sparred. She shot to her feet practically within the stunned Mizu-shinobi's cloak and folded him up with a Jyuuken strike to the abdomen that left him spasming on the ground.

The leader spun toward Hinata, a long staff that looked like it was made out of water forming in his hands. She side-stepped his first swing and the grass burned where the shimmering end of the staff touched it.

The dark-glasses guy made some more acid clones, but he only managed two this time, and the effort left him bent over and weaving. He let out a scream as a dark mass of insects fell out of the canopy and enveloped his head.

Naruto was already charging forward, but couldn't suppress a sympathetic shudder. He was really glad Shino never did that to *him* when they sparred.

The guy staggered, clawing at his face as the acid clones lost cohesion and splashed to the ground. Shino put him out of his misery by the simple expedient of dropping out of the trees on top of him, driving his knees into his back, and slamming him into the forest loam.

The distinctive sound of ribs breaking distracted the leader from his attempts to maim the dodging Hyuuga. Naruto's thrown kunai lodging in his shoulder was even more distracting, making him drop the acid staff.

Naruto's fist hammering into the side of his head just made him unconscious.

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Naruto couldn't help smiling to himself as they tied up the unconscious shinobi. It was about damn time all that planning and training worked right. Of course, it probably helped that they were facing *real* genin for once.

If that freaky grass dude is really a genin, he'd give up ramen.

For life.

Even better, the only damage they'd taken was a couple of discolored spots on the sleeve of his jacket. Using the clones to soak up the initial attacks so they could figure them out worked like a charm, as did using the smoke as cover so Hinata and Shino could slip away and set up surprise attacks.

When Shino found an Earth scroll in the leader's belt pouch, Naruto wanted to cheer but he knew Shino would frown on making too much noise. He settled for lifting Hinata-chan up by the shoulders and spinning around twice as he did the official Konohamaru Corps victory dance.

He belatedly remembered she was still a little hurt when he saw how red her face grew around those awful bruises. "Ah, sorry Hinata-chan!" he hissed as he carefully set her back down. "I forgot," he explained as he looked down, shamefaced.

"A-ano, it's all right Naruto-kun," she said, though she sounded like she was having trouble catching her breath. Had she injured her ribs more than they knew? "I'm glad we have our second scroll too."

As they approached the tower to turn in their scrolls, Shino quietly brought up the possibility of other teams staking out the grounds near the tower to ambush weary competitors with both scrolls.

Naruto thought about this for a minute as they rested on a high tree branch. "As stealthy as we try to be, there's only so many ways to get to the tower, right?"

Shino nodded. "Given the time constraints and limited approach vectors, the situation is not an optimal one for covert movement."

Hinata looked a little distressed, but didn't say anything.

Then a thought struck Naruto. "We're going about this all wrong!" he declared as he brought his hands together. "Tajuu Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!" he said aloud as he pushed almost all the chakra he had into the technique.

Objectively, he knew that he'd improved a lot since that night with Iruka and Mizuki, but he was still surprised at the throng of clones that covered every available bit of flat space he could see.

Shino's eyebrows were clearly visible above his glasses, but the way the left one was twitching indicated that he was less than pleased with Naruto's 'one tool for all jobs' attitude toward his favorite technique.

"All right!" Naruto shouted in a loud voice that had Hinata making frantic shushing gestures toward him. "You know what to do. Split into groups of three and henge!"

There was a staccato roar of pops. When the smoke cleared, a third of the clones looked like Shino and a third looked like a blushing Hinata.

"Now, staying with your groups, spread out and charge the tower! Last ones there have to buy the ramen!" Naruto announced. He turned to Hinata and Shino as the clones took off – which took a

while. There were so many that they got in each other's way at first. "It's not like a recon mission," he said in a more normal tone of voice. "We don't have to conceal that we were here, we just have to make it impossible for anyone to pick us out before we reach the finish line."

Naruto looked at them expectantly. Shino's eyebrow had stopped twitching, but now they both stood stock still. "Let's get moving," he urged them. "I don't have the money to buy that much ramen."

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By the time they reached the tower, Naruto was nursing one hell of a headache. Between the other teams, the traps that had been set, and the normal forest hazards, less than a third of the clones made it through. The problem was random bits of memory that Naruto was constantly bombarded with as his clones were dispelled in an amazing variety of ways.

His wince was particularly painful when he received the memories of the *idiot* that expired trying to give Sabaku no Gaara a noogie. He had no idea you could do that with sand, and it looked *really* painful. At least it was a clone of him and not Shino or Hinata that did it. He didn't want that weird kid focusing on anyone else if he could help it.

On the other hand, he chuckled when he learned of the one that died mooning Neji. But the way he'd gone after the Hinata-clone as well was a little disturbing. Maybe he could tell it really wasn't his cousin and resented the deception. Genius or not, he had no sense of humor whatsoever.

But in the end, what mattered was that his less than subtle ruse had worked. They made it into the tower without another scratch and he was pleasantly surprised when they used their scrolls as the sign suggested and Iruka-sensei appeared in a cloud of smoke.

"Hello!" he greeted them, "I knew you'd…" his face fell as he looked at them, his eyes lingering on Hinata's bruised face. "What happened to you out there? Are you all right?"

Shino twisted a little, finally allowing his discomfort to show as he pressed on his ribs. "We ran into some… unusually skilled… opposition. A visit with a medical professional after our debriefing may be prudent."

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Since they'd reached the tower with almost a full day to go before the second exam ended, there was plenty of time for them to make their reports. Given all the high-level visitors attending the Chuunin Exam, they ended up just talking to Kurenai-sensei in a rather dusty meeting room in the basement of the tower.

Naruto was looking at Kurenai when Shino described the encounter with the grass freak, so he was treated to the sight of his jonin instructor going completely white.

"Are you *absolutely* sure that snake chasing Kiba was a summons?" she asked, interrupting Shino's monologue.

Shino adjusted his glasses. "It gave every appearance of being one," he answered. "Upon receiving a mortal injury, it dissipated in a manner not unlike one of Naruto's shadow clones."

She nodded slowly. "Unfortunately, I agree. Please continue."

Shino continued without interruption, though the subtle cues Naruto was picking up from his sensei suggested it was a near thing. Shino himself paused right after describing Hinata punching the freak in the back – Kurenai spun toward the girl in obvious surprise, and her proud smile had the Hyuuga girl blushing and looking down at her clasped hands.

When he was finished, Kurenai nodded and was silent for a moment, apparently thinking, before she spoke. "You three have done amazingly well, far better than I hoped. However, I want you to be very cautious from now on. There is something going on here that I do not understand. That man you fought was, as best I can tell, an S-Class missing-nin named Orochimaru. He was the genius student

of the Hokage before he betrayed Konoha and should be considered extremely dangerous. Do not seek him out, but if you do see any sign of him, inform a jonin or ANBU at once!"

"Sensei, did Team 7 make it in okay?" Naruto asked in a sick voice. Had that nut case ambushed them again after they separated?

"Yes, they did," Kurenai assured him. "Now I understand why Kakashi left almost immediately with Sasuke. Are you sure the seal he put on you is completely gone, Naruto?"

Naruto nodded and pushed up the sleeve of his jacket to show her the scar. "Er… *it* said it was bad enough being trapped inside me without that messing around with my mind."

Kurenai frowned. "I don't even begin to understand how you can talk to that thing. I'm going to ask the Hokage if he can give me any more information on the seal, or a means to contact someone who can tell us more. I want you to be equally cautious when dealing with your… prisoner. Don't take anything it says at face value."

Naruto nodded soberly. There was little chance of him ever doing that, but he could hear the concern in his sensei's voice.

So, for once, Uzumaki Naruto decided to keep his mouth shut.

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Sitting in an office elsewhere in the tower updating the list of remaining participants, Umino Iruka suddenly stiffened as all the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. He didn't know what was causing it, but he instinctively knew that a massive violation of the natural order was occurring. He suspiciously peered around, even looking under his desk, but he couldn't find anything to explain that uneasy feeling.

Controlling his shudders of dread, the chuunin sat back down and double-checked the list again.

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Naruto also didn't resist at all when Kurenai sent them to the infirmary to be checked out by the medic-nins. He wasn't so much concerned for himself though. Shino was still slightly stooped over, favoring his ribs. The deviance wasn't great, but it was apparent to anyone familiar with his normal ruler-straight posture. Hinata-chan was visibly worse off, and he had to struggle not to flinch every time he saw the massive bruises on her face from the battle with Orochimaru. He'd follow sensei's orders to avoid him in general, but if he had a chance to smack him one to cover their retreat, he'd definitely take it.

The medics mostly ignored him at first, which was fine by him. But Shino and Hinata were insistent, actually downright scary, about them attending to him as well.

The senior medic, with a frown of distaste, performed the seals for what appeared to be a diagnostic jutsu of some sort. His extended palm passed over Naruto's head and torso without comment, but paused over his forearm. Naruto didn't think his other injuries would even be detectable - the speed with which he healed was pretty unreal. With a sigh, he slid up his sleeve again.

"What happened there?" the medic-nin asked curiously, leaning forward and peering at the scar.

"Curse seal," Naruto said with a shrug. "I had to blow it up."

The medic-nin straightened up so fast he almost fell over backwards. "I-I see," he stammered. "I think you are fine to go now. All of you."

Naruto glanced over at his teammates. Shino was taking deeper breaths now, relief evident in his posture, and Hinata was bowing to a younger woman, and when she turned toward him her face was unmarked. "Thank you very much," he said politely, bowing to the surprised senior medic-nin.

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With hours to go before the second exam officially ended, there was more than enough time to get cleaned up and take a short nap in the examinee's dormitory before Kurenai-sensei collected them.

The jonin led them to a large enclosed auditorium, where they joined the ranks of the teams that completed the second exam. Naruto was a little ashamed to admit he was surprised to see Team 10 among the victors, though he supposed Shikamaru would have found it more troublesome to put up with Ino's complaints if they failed. The latter was glaring at Sakura since Team 7 was lined up next to them and the pink-haired kunoichi was between her and Sasuke. Sasuke looked a little pale, but just as surly as ever, so that Kakashi guy must have fixed his seal.

Naruto wasn't surprised to see Team Gai there as well, but the only other Konoha team to pass the second exam was Kabuto's trio of older genin. Unfortunately, the Sand team was there as well. Naruto knew there wasn't much chance of that Gaara character not making it through, but he'd held out some faint hope that one of his teammates might have to drop out and thereby disqualify all three.

He suppressed a smirk when he felt the killing intent radiating from both Gaara and Neji. It was nice to know his skills at annoying people hadn't grown rusty since his academy days.

Still, that left only eighteen participants in the exam, fifteen of them from Konoha, which Naruto thought was pretty damn good. He couldn't help but smile a little as the Hokage addressed them from a raised platform, flanked by the teams' jonin sensei.

That smile disappeared soon enough though. After the Hokage congratulated them on passing the second round, he explained the reasons why they do a joint test and introduced the third examiner, a guy with a nasty cough named Gekkou Hayate. In between throat clearings, the sickly-looking guy told them there were more people left than could be run through the third examination. There would have to be a preliminary elimination round.

Most of the people around Naruto made comments about that, and few of them were favorable.

Both the preliminary round and the actual third exam would be one-on-one battles between the examinees. However, the teams were effectively dissolved until the end of the examination, so losing would not disqualify your team-mates. Naruto cautiously looked around at his fellow genin and frowned. His eyes were met with hard glares from more than a few. According to the examiner, only those who won the preliminary round and fought publicly in the finals would have a chance of being granted chuunin status.

Before they began, Hayate asked if anyone felt like they could no longer continue. To Naruto's surprise, Kabuto raised his hand, saying he was too injured to fight. Naruto didn't think he looked that beat up, but the examiner just nodded and the silver-haired genin exited through the door they entered by.

"All right, with seventeen of you, there will be eight matches," Hayate announced. "After eight matches, whoever the odd person is will have a bye and proceed directly to the finals. These matches are randomly selected, so you will all have an equal chance."

With that, the rest of them were directed to stairs that led up to a balcony that overlooked the arena floor. Most of their jonin sensei joined them up there and the genin assembled in little team-sized clumps.

"I can't believe all the rookies made it, and almost no one else did," Naruto muttered.

"That does seem to stretch the bounds of probability," Shino agreed. "I hope that no one takes it as a sign of collusion."

"Why the hell would we want to cheat?" Naruto demanded, his voice rising slightly. "If we aren't qualified to take chuunin-level missions, what's the point of making us chuunin?"

"Remember what the Hokage said: The exams often serve political purposes," Kurenai interjected, "and showcase the strengths of each village. If a village's shinobi look stronger to outsiders, they are more likely to be hired for missions. However, the Hokage doesn't countenance such tactics. Wars between hidden villages have started over less." The glare that accompanied her words spoke even louder and Naruto subsided.

The electronic bulletin board flashed, and announced the first randomly selected match, Adakou Yoroi versus Akimichi Chouji.

Kabuto's teammate was a large, muscular man with small dark glasses and a cloth covering the rest of his face. Unlike the friendly silver-haired genin, Yoroi was a fairly nasty-looking customer. The chubby boy didn't even come up to his opponent's shoulder. No sooner did Hayate call for them to begin than he swiped at Chouji with a glowing hand.

Chouji jumped back with a barely muffled screech, but the heel of the larger man's hand still brushed his shoulder. Chouji visibly wilted and stumbled backward on unsteady legs.

"You have no defense against my technique," Yoroi sneered as he stalked toward Chouji. The boy backed away, looking like he wanted to run for it.

Yoroi herded Chouji into a corner and took another swipe at him. Chouji dived to the side, barely avoiding the attack. He frantically scrambled to his feet, his eyes glued to his opponent.

"Would you stop delaying the inevitable?" Yoroi growled. "Or are you a coward as well as fat?"

The sudden silence was deafening – the only thing that marred it was the single word muttered by Shikamaru.

"Shit."

Chouji's face went red. "Did you call me… fat?"

Yoroi paused in his advance. Privately, Naruto didn't blame him. There was suddenly an overabundance of killing intent in the room, and it hadn't been there ten seconds ago.

"Yeah, I did," Yoroi snapped in a belligerent tone. "Do you think you can stop me?" he asked, making a 'come hither' gesture with his glowing hand. "I'll pull all the chakra out of your body faster than you can empty a bento box… fatass."

Naruto cringed.

Chouji's eyes seemed to fill with flames. "I'm going to crush you like a grape!" he screamed as he jumped backward. " *Ninpou Baika no Jutsu!"*

Naruto's mouth dropped open as Chouji's torso expanded to several times the normal size, becoming almost perfectly spherical. With a jerk, his arms, legs, and head retracted, only to be replaced by jets of blue chakra flames. Chouji began to spin in place, suspended by the jets of fire, until he touched down and began rolling forward with increasing speed.

The dumbfounded Yoroi stared at the Akimichi Meatball Tank bearing down on him. At the last second he jumped back to avoid it, but the spinning Chouji kept accelerating. Yoroi dodged aside at the last moment, but Chouji still managed to clip him, sending the older genin flying.

Naruto decided the spin must have made that hit even harder than it appeared, because Yoroi landed heavily on his side and lurched to his feet favoring his right leg.

Chouji didn't corner very sharply in his Meatball Tank form, so Yoroi had time to regain his bearings. By the time Chouji got turned around to make another pass, Yoroi had his chakra-draining technique ready. Again, he side-stepped at the last second, trailing his palm

across Chouji's axis of rotation. The Meatball Tank wobbled as its rotation veered out of true, but Chouji got it back under control again and came around for another pass. However, the chakra drain seemed to have had an effect, because he wasn't spinning nearly as fast as before.

Yoroi tried to do the same trick again, but this time Chouji managed to veer into him as he dodged aside. Yoroi let out a startled scream as Chouji ground him down into the cement floor. He slammed his palm directly against Chouji's mass and the snap of his fingers being bent backward and broken was sickening.

Yoroi was completely out of sight when Chouji's jutsu collapsed, leaving him tumbling forward to land in a moaning heap. When the dust cleared, the older genin's broken body was visible amidst the shards of concrete.

After looking at Chouji, who was slowly sitting up, holding his head, Hayate quickly declared him the winner of the first match and called for some medic-nins. Chouji stared at his opponent, eyes widening in horror, until his sensei appeared next to him and led him back up to the balcony, speaking softly the entire way.

After Yoroi had been carried off, the second match was announced. Tenten from Team Gai was pitted against the girl from Gaara's team, Temari. As soon as it was announced, Gai and Lee began cheering for her at the top of their lungs. Naruto and his team slowly edged away from the spandex-clad duo to preserve their hearing.

Naruto ended up near Shikamaru as Tenten began her first attack, which amazingly enough missed.

"This is going to be troublesome," Shikamaru murmured.

"Why do you say that?" Naruto asked in a low voice.

"It's already over," Shikamaru said and turned toward Chouji, who had just finished talking to his sensei, Asuma. The boy looked a little

more settled, but he was still a little green around the edges.

"If Shikamaru says it's over, it's over," Chouji confirmed with a nod.

Naruto frowned and turned back to the fight. Tenten did some weird trick with a scroll that allowed her to throw a dozen weapons at a time, but Temari just blocked them all by swinging her fan. Despite its lack of success, Naruto was really glad she hadn't used that technique on him and Lee during her 'target practice' sessions.

Naruto glanced over at Shikamaru, but his expression didn't change. He turned toward Shino who appeared to be frowning. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to be picking up on, but two of the smarter people he knew didn't like this match, so he started to worry about Tenten.

Tenten raised the stakes with her next attack, using two scrolls at once to throw a simply ridiculous number of sharp objects at the Sand kunoichi. Unfortunately, it was no more effective – Temari just swung her fan and blew them all off course.

Then Tenten did something with chakra to lift the weapons up again and send them raining down on her foe… only this time she was caught in the blast of wind from Temari's fan and sent flying.

Naruto scowled. Tenten specialized in ranged attacks, but it was almost impossible for her to hit Temari because of her fan. This was almost the worst possible match-up for her. Was that what Shikamaru and Shino were annoyed about?

The fight ended when Temari finally attacked with her fan, creating a massive whirlwind that pulled Tenten into the air and knocked her unconscious with chakra-laced wind.

As Naruto watched Hayate declare Temari the winner, he realized something about the nature of the test. Random or not, these one-on-one fights could easily pit someone against an opponent that they didn't have the techniques or the tactics to fight. When they fought

as a team, each member instinctively sought out opponents they could do well against. For example, someone trying to use Taijutsu to defend against a Hyuuga like Hinata was asking for a quick trip to the hospital. Likewise, someone without area effect attacks wouldn't fare well against Shino's bugs.

But shinobi didn't always fight in teams, and they didn't always have the luxury of picking their opponent. Forcing them to fight someone with skills that trumped their normal tactics made them learn to adapt on the fly – or learn to lose gracefully. Of course, in the field, on a real mission, you'd replace "losing" with "dying."

Such sobering thoughts made him all the more uneasy when the next match was announced: "Aburame Shino versus Inuzuka Kiba."

Naruto shook his head. He didn't need to worry so much about his teammate. Even if he won, Kiba wouldn't do anything that would permanently injure a former classmate. Loud and boastful he might be, but he wasn't cruel or vicious.

He grinned and patted his silent friend on the shoulder as he walked by. He knew from sparring with him that Shino didn't particularly like to lose.

When the boys faced each other in front of Hayate, Kiba nodded and smirked. "Don't think I'm going to go easy on you, because of what happened in the forest," he said, sticking his jaw out belligerently.

"Don't hold back on my account," Shino replied coolly as he adjusted his glasses.

As soon as Hayate signaled for them to begin, Kiba crouched down and brought his hands together to form seals. "Gijyuu Ninpou, Shikyaku no Jutsu!" he growled as he dropped onto all fours.

Naruto's eyes widened as Kiba's body was enveloped in a light haze of chakra and his fingernails grew into sharp claws.

Shino dropped into a combat stance with more weight balanced on his back leg. The shafts of his kamas shot out of his sleeves and into his waiting hands, but he did not immediately deploy the blades.

"Let's go!" Kiba shouted and charged forward in a blur of motion.

Shino's feet didn't move, but his torso twisted as his left arm shot forward. There was a loud clang and Kiba reeled backward, his forehead protector twisted halfway around his head.

"I thought you were faster than that," Shino observed in the same tone of voice he might use to discuss the weather. He spun the kama once in his hand before returning it to a guard position. With the blade still concealed inside, it looked more like a baton. A thick baton with a metal cap on each end.

Kiba snarled something that Naruto was just as glad they couldn't hear from up on the balcony. There were certain words and phrases that Kurenai-sensei had informed him were not appropriate for mixed company. Kiba pulled something out of his equipment pouch and threw it at Shino's feet.

Naruto's team mate was enveloped in thick clouds of black smoke. Kiba dived into the smoke cloud while Akamaru circled it warily. There were several dull thuds before Kiba stumbled backward out of the cloud, his hand pressed against his jaw.

When the smoke dissipated, Shino was still standing in the same spot, in the same stance. He didn't say a word, and that just seemed to further enrage his opponent.

Naruto frowned when Kiba pulled a pill out of his pouch and flipped it to Akamaru. The puppy gulped it down and then growled fiercely as its fur changed from white to reddish-brown. Kiba gulped down a pill as well, and then crouched down. Akamaru sprang onto his master's back as Kiba growled "Gijyuu Ninpou: Jyuujin Bunshin!"

There was a burst of smoke, and when it cleared Naruto now saw two feral-looking Kibas glaring at Shino. It was impossible to tell which one was Kiba and which one was really Akamaru.

"You know, Naruto makes a lot more than two clones when we free spar," Shino observed in a neutral voice.

That just seemed to enrage them further and they sprang at Shino, extending the short claws that had replaced their fingernails.

This time, Shino did move, pivoting smoothly to the side and out of reach of one of the Kibas. The other reached out to claw at the Aburame, but Shino brought his kama around with surprising speed and smacked him on the elbow with a loud crack.

The struck Kiba yelped and somersaulted forward. One of his trailing legs hooked toward Shino's head, forcing the Aburame to duck. The other one pivoted and leapt toward Shino. Shino spun away from the charge, but left a piece of his jacket sleeve behind.

Naruto was impressed by how well the beast clone coordinated with the original as they took turns springing at Shino. His team mate always managed to avoid or re-direct their attacks, but it was often a close thing.

Finally, when Shino was forced to jump backwards from a coordinated strike, one of the Kibas yelled "Gatsuuga!" and they both began to spin so fast that they were little more than spiraling grey blurs as they barreled into Shino, hurling him into the air as more rips appeared in his jacket.

Both Kibas landed in a crouch, balanced on their fingertips and the balls of their feet. Shino twisted as he fell and barely managed to land on his feet.

But he still had a firm grip on his weapons. There was a loud click as the blades folded out of the shafts and locked into place. Naruto

didn't have to be able to see through the dark glasses to know his friend was getting serious.

Both Kibas launched themselves into the air with another cry of "Gatsuuga!" as their Double-Fang Technique sent them hurling down at the ground where Shino stood.

Naruto was dimly aware of his fingers digging into the railing.

There was a cloud of dust as both spirals slammed into the ground, totally obscuring the combatants. Naruto winced as one of Shino's kamas came flying out of the dust cloud, apparently torn from his grasp. It flipped end over end through the air until it clattered to the ground near the balcony. Naruto's eyes picked up the wet red stain running along the edge of the blade.

Kiba stumbled out of the cloud as the dust settled, coughing hard. Shino picked himself up off the floor of the arena, cradling one wrist against his chest, while still holding his remaining kama at the ready. Beyond him, Naruto could see another Kiba, sprawled on the ground with a jagged cut arcing up one sleeve of his jacket – which was now leaking blood fairly rapidly.

The wounded Kiba let out a whimper and with a pop turned back into an Akamaru with a bloody foreleg. The nin-dog edged away from Shino, carefully holding the wounded limb so it didn't touch the ground.

"You bastard!" Kiba growled. "You hurt Akamaru!" He stalked toward the wounded Aburame, his face constricted with fury. But after the third step, he stumbled, and then fell to one knee. With a surprised expression, he toppled forward onto his face.

Hayate stared at Kiba, then looked over at Shino.

"His chakra has been exhausted," Shino explained. A line of kikai bugs exited Kiba's jacket and made their way toward their host. Another mass crawled out of Akamaru's fur as the small dog's rear

legs folded up and it sat down. It slowly curled up on the floor, barely lifting its head enough to lick at the wound on its leg.

Hayate swallowed and then coughed. "Winner, Aburame Shino."

Medic-nins with a stretcher came out and rolled Kiba onto it. Another approached Shino, but the boy pointed toward the prostrate dog. With some reluctance, the medic picked up the dozing Akamaru and Shino followed him out the arena exit.

Naruto stared after his team mate as he made his way out of the arena, pausing only as the next match was announced. Naruto was wondering whether Shino was really all right and actually missed the announcement. He looked up as the door closed behind his friend and saw the names: "Nara Shikamaru versus Tsurugi Misumi".

Of course, the disgusted sigh coming from his classmate should have clued Naruto in that Shikamaru had been called. The Nara genin looked far less enthusiastic about the match than Chouji, let alone Ino. He didn't even start moving until his jounin-sensei, Asuma, put his hand on the annoyed-looking genin's shoulder.

The last of Kabuto's purple-clad teammates had clear glasses to go with his weird veil. However, his uniform tunic left his arms bare, covered only by a plain white short-sleeve shirt. That and the long gloves on his hands suggested he might be some variety of close-range fighter.

The older genin seemed a bit more eager to fight, and sneered at Shikamaru as he approached. "Don't think I'll take it easy on you because you're just a spoiled brat."

Shikamaru plodded up to his place in front of Hayate and then finally raised his eyes to look at his opponent. "I didn't think anyone could be as annoying as Ino," he drawled.

"Hey!" Ino shouted, shaking her fist. But no one really paid much attention. Their arguments at the academy were as predictable as

the behavior of Sasuke's fan club.

"Once I get hold of you," the older genin warned, "this fight will be over. You should show more respect for your seniors!"

"Yeah, yeah," Shikamaru sighed, rolling his eyes. "Now you sound like my dad."

Hayate evidently decided to start the match before it started without him. "Begin!" he commanded.

Misumi instantly charged forward and launched a taijutsu combination that flowed into a grappling move. Naruto blinked and rubbed his eyes. "Flowed" was really the right word. The older genin's arms, and then his legs twisted around Shikamaru in a bizarre fashion, like they were made of rubber.

In an instant, he'd wrapped Shikamaru up, binding his legs in place and pinning his arms against his torso. "I can unhinge my joints and use chakra to control my body. I can strangle you or simply break your bones until you give up."

Naruto swallowed. That was a really, really creepy fighting style. Unless maybe you were fighting a girl… he swallowed again and blushed. No, it was still really creepy. How could such a weirdo like him and his chakra-sucking partner grow up in Konoha? At least Kabuto seemed somewhat normal.

"That's interesting," Shikamaru grunted. "And informative," he added as his neck muscles strained against the arm wrapped around them. "In return, I feel obliged to remind you of the last village council meeting."

Naruto frowned, as did the weirdo and damn near everyone else he could see.

"What about it?" Misumi asked, pausing but not loosening his grip at all.

"They cut funding to the hospital," Shikamaru replied in a bored tone.

"What does that have to do with anything?" Misumi demanded, getting angry again.

Shikamaru grunted as the man's limbs seemed to tighten even more. "Without that money, they haven't been able to stock up on some of the rarer anti-venins… like the Wind Country King Scorpion venom on the kunai I'm holding against your arm."

There was a loud snapping sound as Misumi sprang away from his prey, limbs flying out in all directions. He landed in an awkward crouch as his joints realigned. He glared at Shikamaru who spread empty hands before him. "You little liar!" he accused.

Shikamaru shrugged as his hand reached into his pouch. "I bluffed, but these are real," he said as he hurled a pair of shuriken at Misumi's head. There was a cracking sound as his neck stretched upward, making the shuriken miss completely.

"You missed, boy!" Misumi sneered, his voice sounding really strange now.

"I never intended to hit. *Kagemane no Jutsu!* " Shikamaru's shadow stretched out along the ground, merging with Misumi's shadow. As soon as contact was made, Misumi's body froze in place. Shikamaru moved his arms from a guard position to let them hang free at his sides. As he did this, Misumi's arms moved as well, perfectly mirroring the rookie's motions.

Then Shikamaru inhaled deeply and bent forward rapidly at the waist. The stringy genin folded almost perfectly in half, his head facing his knees. With his disjointed neck stretching out due to the speed of the movement, Misumi's forehead struck the ground with a loud crack, making Naruto wince.

No sooner did that happen then Shikamaru straightened and bent backwards in one motion. His back arched, the genin's palms struck

the floor just like one of the flexibility exercises Iruka-sensei had drilled them on in the academy. The back of the dazed Misumi's head struck the floor with an even louder thump.

"Release," Shikamaru said, still bent backwards. The second his shadow detached from Misumi's the older genin collapsed in a boneless heap.

With a grunt, Shikamaru pushed off from the floor and straightened up, stretching as he did so. Naruto noted that the number one lazy bastard from his class hadn't even moved from his starting point.

Shikamaru raised an eyebrow at Hayate, cocking his head toward his unconscious opponent. Hayate blinked twice. "Winner, Nara Shikamaru," he announced with an embarrassed cough.

Everyone stared at Shikamaru as he slouched back toward the stairs leading to the observation deck. Even his own team was silent as he returned to his spot, leaning his elbows on the railing with a bored sigh.

"You were… actually good, Shika…" Ino said, eyes wide. She shook her head. "Not as cool as Sasuke-kun, but not bad at all."

"How troublesome," Shikamaru murmured. Chouji offered him a bag of chips, but Shikamaru just shook his head.

The medic-nins took a little while getting Misumi loaded onto a stretcher. It seemed to Naruto that they were a little reluctant to touch his stretchy neck, making it hard to keep his head on the stretcher, and not dragging on the ground. In the end, they finally managed to get him out of there and Hayate asked for the next match to be displayed.

Naruto felt a chill go down the back of his neck with the selection that was displayed: "Hyuuga Hinata versus Hyuuga Neji." He spun toward his team mate, who'd gone even paler than usual.

Her eyes were a little wide, but her mouth took on a determined line as he looked at her. Something prompted him to speak before she walked away. "You can do this, Hinata," he said in a low voice.

She paused, one foot lifted to take her first step. She gave him a single nod as her face took on an even more determined expression.

Naruto watched her march down the stairs to the arena floor, feeling like there was something he should be doing. But he didn't know what. He glanced over at Kurenai-sensei, and while she didn't say anything, he could read her expressions well enough to know that she wasn't pleased with this match-up either.

A voice from the opposite direction made Naruto jump. "This is most unfortunate."

He spun around, surprised to see Shino already rejoining them, his arm bound in a light sling. Naruto just nodded, remembering how Neji had gone after his kage bunshin that had been henged to look like Hinata.

While Hinata's posture could only be described as resolute as she marched to the center of the floor, Neji seemed almost unconcerned. Hinata dropped into a basic Jyuuken guard position when Hayate told them to begin, but Neji just stood there glaring at her.

"You can't win, you know," the older Hyuuga said in a matter-of-fact tone. "You have never defeated me in a sparring match; you don't have the physical or mental capacity to challenge me. If you surrender now, I will not be forced to harm a member of the main family and you can return to your career as a mediocre kunoichi."

It took a moment for Naruto to realize that the grinding sound was coming from his own molars.

Surprisingly, Hinata showed almost no reaction to his words, other than minutely drawing her eyebrows together. "I have worked too

hard to get here, cousin, and I refuse to disappoint my sensei or my team."

Neji stared at her for a moment, and Naruto wondered if he was actually surprised by Hinata's words. She seemed nothing like the exhausted wreck he'd seen the morning after her family's 'special training.' The next instant the Hyuuga genius blurred into motion as he attacked.

Hinata smoothly blocked and countered and the two Jyuuken-users began an elaborate dance, punctuated with sharp bursts of chakra as they launched strikes designed to shred internal organs. Naruto's eyes could barely keep up with their movements, despite all the time he'd spent sparring with Hinata. This made him realize two things.

The first was that Jyuuken users are just as adept at fighting each other as those who practice other taijutsu styles, and in a peculiar way the moves almost seemed to interlock.

The second, more chilling realization, was that Neji was even faster than he thought. Hinata was holding her own, but Naruto feared she was just one mis-step away from disaster. He could feel the chakra bursts from where he stood, and they were nothing like the weaker spikes Hinata used when she sparred with him. Those blows would numb his arm for a short time, even shorter if he expended the chakra.

These blows were intended to maim, if not kill.

Still, Hinata held off her cousin's attacks, and her counterblows sometimes put him back on the defensive. Naruto wanted to cheer her on, but he was also afraid of distracting her at a fatal moment.

As he watched, something began to bother him. The chakra behind Hinata's Jyuuken strikes began to falter. It was almost like she was exhausting her reserves, but he knew from their sparring sessions that she had far more than she'd expended so far. He wondered if

she was trying to lull Neji into getting overconfident, setting him up for a big hit.

Maybe Shino wasn't the sneakiest shinobi on Team Eight.

Finally, it happened. Hinata ducked under Neji's strike at her face, instead of blocking. Rather than making her eyeballs explode, the taller boy ended up with Hinata well inside his guard and her palm strike nailed him firmly in the stomach.

She jumped back as Neji grunted, still on guard.

But the older Hyuuga just looked at her. And then he smiled. "You've lost," he said.

Hinata frowned as her Byakugan seemed to release on its own and Naruto noticed her flexing her hand and rubbing at her forearm. At her cousin's words, she pushed up the sleeve of her jacket and Naruto saw that it was dotted with small chakra burns, corresponding with places he knew held tenketsu points. It wasn't like he hadn't flushed his own out often enough. "Damn," he muttered under his breath. For Neji to be capable of doing that, *during a fight like that* , was pretty impressive. It also explained why Hinata couldn't focus chakra down her arms anymore.

Hinata's eyes flickered towards the observation balcony, and for an instant she seemed to stare right into his eyes. Then she turned back to her cousin and her eyes hardened. The Byakugan was active again, but Naruto couldn't remember seeing her do the seals this time. Had she managed to do it without them?

"I am a shinobi of the leaf, Neji-nii-san," she said, "and a Hyuuga. I. Do. Not. Give. Up." With that, she jumped backward, throwing a brace of shuriken as she did so.

Neji dodged the barrage with a burst of speed that made Naruto even more anxious. "You've picked a bad time to discover your pride," he said in a cold voice as he closed in on Hinata.

Hinata evaded a strike to her chest by dropping to the ground and launching a leg sweep to knock Neji off his feet. Neji simply leapt backward, flipping to land on his feet and charge back in as a single movement.

Hinata somersaulted backward and clashed her wrists together in a motion she and Naruto had practiced many times. She spun, palms out, but as each arm moved toward Neji, she dropped her hand flat into a knife-hand and the weighted bracer flew off her wrist. Neji ducked backward, avoiding the first one, but the second struck him on the temple with stunning force.

The Hyuuga genius stumbled, backward, a cut opened at the corner of one eye, as Hinata released the weights on her legs and kicked them toward him as well. However, despite their practice, Naruto knew neither of them was as accurate flinging their leg weights, and Neji easily evaded both of them.

"I see you decided to resort to tricks to make up for your lack of skill," Neji sneered. "But it won't help. You were born a failure and you will die a failure, a blot on the honor of the *main* family."

Hinata didn't respond verbally, but just swallowed as she settled into a Goken stance. Naruto knew she wasn't nearly as proficient in the style she'd only recently learned with Gai-sensei, but with her arms like that… her Jyuuken was pretty much useless to her.

Neji's face began to lose its emotionless mask as he moved toward her, launching a series of blindingly fast attacks.

But with her weights off, Hinata moved so fast that she was little more than a blur, making several people gasp and Lee began to very quietly cheer her on. Naruto recognized several of her evasions as ones *he'd* worked out from sparring with *her* . "Go Hinata!" he roared, making everyone jump. "Kick his ass!"

Naruto felt a hand latch onto his shoulder and quickly muttered, "Sorry sensei."

Neji's expression grew even more frustrated as Hinata continued to dodge his Jyuuken strikes. She improvised quick off-axis attacks, making him guard his footing and distracting him from predicting her next dodge. Naruto began to hope she'd pull this off. She managed to connect a few times, but her margin of error was so thin…

Finally, it happened. Neji apparently *allowed* her to land a hammerfist strike to his ribs, not even trying to block but instead using that instant to land a Jyuuken strike that speared into the left side of her back, below the shoulderblade.

Neji stumbled back, clapping a hand to his side, where his rib was bruised, if not cracked. But Hinata fell to one knee and coughed, blood spattering the floor in front of where she knelt. She slowly toppled to one side, falling prone.

"So much for your tricks," Neji said in a dismissive tone as he turned away, and in that instant Naruto would gladly have ended his life.

"It looks like this match is over," Hayate said in a voice that sounded slightly regretful.

"N-no…" The voice was faint, but unmistakably came from where Hinata lay.

Neji spun back toward his cousin, his expression a mixture of frustration, annoyance, and something else that Naruto couldn't identify.

Hinata painfully struggled to her feet. "I'm not done with you yet," she said, her eyes fixed on her cousin.

What followed next was one of the most painful and frustrating experiences of Naruto's life. Hinata could barely hold her Goken stance as Neji strode over to her. His fist snapped out and slammed into her jaw, sending her crashing to the ground.

And she got up again.

Neji punched her in the stomach, folding her up as he knocked her off her feet. He didn't even bother to use Jyuuken anymore. The damage Hinata had taken rendered her barely able to stand, let alone defend herself.

But she kept getting up again.

"Why do you keep getting up?" Neji finally demanded. "Do you want to die? Do you think that will make you less of a failure?"

Hinata slowly raised her head, meeting Neji's glare.

"You were destined to be the Hyuuga failure from the day you were born," Neji snapped. "I've seen that with my eyes from the first day I saw you. You cursed your own powerlessness and blamed yourself. But we all knew the truth, and you haven't changed at all. That is your destiny, accept it and stop this foolishness."

"You're wrong, Neji-nii-san," Hinata said between shuddering breaths. She paused to cough up a little more blood. She wiped her mouth and cocked her head to one side, looking past her cousin. "I can see that you are hurting worse than I am. You hate yourself even more than you hate me."

Neji let out a strangled cry of rage as Hinata's eyes rolled back in her head and her legs began to buckle. Time seemed to stand still as Hayate yelled for him to stop. There was a sudden rush of air and Naruto dimly realized that Kurenai-sensei had launched herself off the balcony.

But his eyes were locked onto the slowly toppling form of his friend and teammate, falling even as sure death approached her. Naruto wasn't even aware of his fingers forming seals, but suddenly he was there – half deafened by a thunderous pop and gritting his teeth against the spike of pain that seemed to have been rammed through his chest.

Naruto stumbled backward, clutching his chest. Hayate seemed to have been caught flat-footed, but Kurenai-sensei, Kakashi, and Gai-sensei all had a hold of Hyuuga Neji, whose palm still glowed from the chakra spike that had struck Naruto. The so-called genius was bitterly protesting favoritism being shown to the main house, but Naruto ignored him.

Up on the balcony where Naruto had been standing, Hinata crumpled to the ground. Shino grabbed her, keeping her head from striking the balcony, but she was still unconscious. Bloody froth bubbled at the corner of her mouth. "Medics! Now!" Shino *yelled* in a loud voice that made everyone jump.

Naruto's chest hurt like hell, but he straightened up enough to limp over to the stairs, trailing behind the scrambling medics. He stopped when Kurenai grabbed his shoulder.

"Stay out of their way," she said in a quiet voice, her eyes glued on Shino as he supported Hinata's head and helped the medic-nins load her onto a stretcher.

Naruto nodded, slowly straightening and wiping the blood from his chin. He watched the medics carry the stretcher down off the balcony at a fast trot. The haste with which they moved chilled his blood. Her wounds were likely to be at least as serious as he had feared. As they passed him, he couldn't help but stare at his friend's face. Her skin had gone as pale as snow and the rise and fall of her chest was barely perceptible.

Naruto felt a sudden spike of killing intent from behind him, seemingly coinciding with Gai's voice. He spun around. Neji's face was a frozen mask of fury as he was remonstrated by his jounin-sensei, and suddenly Naruto wanted nothing more than to rip that bastard's throat out with his teeth. The light in the arena seemed to take on a reddish tone as his fingernails dug into his palms, drawing blood. Naruto was dimly aware of startled glances coming from Kakashi as well as Gai, but it was Kurenai's words that sunk in.

"Calm down and we'll follow Hinata to the infirmary," she all but whispered in his ear.

Naruto spun on his heel and took off after the medic-nins, ignoring the blood dripping from his fists.

---

Shino watched the rest of his team leave. While he might have preferred to follow them, it would serve no logical purpose. Also, there were still several shinobi present in the room that possessed unknown capabilities. He could best serve his team by staying and making careful observations. He had qualified for the next round, and he had little doubt that Naruto would as well, so any information he might glean could prove vital.

But that didn't mean he had to like it.

Maito Gai had removed Hyuuga Neji from the room, which was fortunate. There were several individuals present that did not appreciate his actions, and candor required that he admit he was one of them. It would not do for them to begin the next set of matches before the preliminaries concluded, as he doubted that such eagerness would be appreciated by the examiners.

Glancing around, he noticed that both Rock Lee and Tenten were staring at him. Looking down, he realized that there was a fine spray of aspirated blood across the front of his jacket. Hinata's blood. He looked back up.

"What variety of flowers would be appropriate?" he asked in the calmest, most matter-of-fact tone of voice he could muster.

"What?" Tenten asked, rubbing a bruise on the side of her head that she'd sustained in her loss to Temari. To their credit, both of them appeared upset with the outcome of the last match, but Shino still had a point to make.

"For your team mate's funeral," he clarified.

Lee paled.

---

Naruto followed as long as he could, but suddenly the medics started shouting and carried Hinata's stretcher through a pair of swinging doors marked 'For Authorized Personnel Only'.

Kurenai-sensei grabbed his shoulder again, halting him in his tracks. "We'll only be in the way," she murmured before she turned to one of the attendants.

Naruto looked down, taking some deep breaths and resisting the urge to leap through the doors anyway. His palms ached a little, but despite the blood caked on his hands, they were unmarked and his chest felt like it was getting back to normal. He felt guilty as hell, like he let someone down, but he couldn't see what he should have done differently. Did telling Hinata to kick Neji's ass make her want to keep fighting long after she couldn't? Was it wrong for him to encourage her? Had his Kawarimi no Jutsu hurt her worse, or was it more important that Neji not hit her again?

Neji. Hyuuga Neji. Hinata's own cousin tried to kill her! Was he mad about something to do with their clan? What was that crap about the main family about anyway? How the hell could he blame her for that? It wasn't like she was in charge of their crappy family. Was he just taking it out on her because he could?

Naruto shook his head. He didn't really care why that creep had a vendetta against Hinata. What he did know was that he was going to beat that bastard like a drum and make his hair bleed. No one hurt his friends, especially Hinata.

Naruto looked up, blinking. Where had that thought come from?

He felt a hand on his elbow and spun around. Kurenai-sensei didn't even blink, but began speaking as soon as she had his attention. "Naruto, I'm going to stay down here with Hinata, but I need you to go back to the auditorium."

Naruto shook his head, but she cut him off before he could speak.

"I know you want to stay here, but you still haven't had your preliminary match yet. If you stay down here you will be disqualified," she reminded him.

"That's not important," Naruto said in a stubborn tone.

"You won't get a chance to fight Neji if you don't advance," Kurenai reminded him. "He'll probably say you stayed down here to get disqualified because you were afraid to face him."

Naruto had to give his sensei credit. She was pretty good at putting the screws to people when she wanted to. He let out a sigh that sounded more like a growl.

Kurenai sighed as well. "All right, Naruto. What do you think Hinata will think if you stay down here because she was hurt?"

It didn't take much imagination to figure that out. "She'll think it was her fault I was disqualified," he said in a resigned tone.

"Right Naruto," Kurenai agreed, "and that's not something she needs to deal with while she's recovering. The nurse says they got her here just in time, and they do need to do some serious work before she regains consciousness. I know you and Shino will both want to be here when she wakes up, so beat whoever you have to fight quickly."

Naruto nodded. "Yes sensei!" he said loudly enough to draw a glare from the attendant before he ran back down the hallway.

---

Naruto entered the auditorium just in time to see both Ino and Sakura being helped off the floor. Both of them looked pretty shaky and he wondered who won. He made his way over to Shino as quickly as he could without drawing too much attention.

"She's in surgery now," Naruto said in response to the unspoken question. "Kurenai-sensei thinks she's going to be okay, but they got her there just in time and she'll be out a while."

Shino nodded and his posture seemed to loosen a little – though it might just have been Naruto's imagination. "You only missed one match," Shino said, nodding toward the two battered kunoichi. "Double knock-out," he added.

Naruto blinked. He wondered how the hell they managed that. But his attention was diverted by the display for the next match: "Uchiha Sasuke versus Uzumaki Naruto."

Naruto glanced over at Sasuke, who just smirked back at him. Naruto frowned. The genin was rolling the shoulder that he remembered the curse seal being on. Kurenai assured him it had been dealt with, but he wondered.

Naruto quickly knelt down next to Shino, adjusting his sandal. While he was bent over, he hit the releases on his arm and leg weights, leaving them in a pile next to his team mate. When he straightened up, Sasuke was leaving the stairs and Hayate was frowning at him, so Naruto just vaulted the railing.

Of course, without his weights, he went considerably farther than he expected and landed badly off balance. Sasuke just rolled his eyes while Hayate cleared his throat.

"Can't you do anything right, dead last?" Sasuke asked him in a superior tone as he slid back into an advanced taijutsu stance. Naruto ignored him, knowing the Uchiha just wanted him angry and off balance.

But that didn't help one bit when he heard his opponent's next words. "I hope you put up a better fight than your pathetic teammate."

Naruto looked up at Sasuke, his rage returning.

Sasuke smirked, evidently pleased that his barb had struck home.

"Begin!" Hayate commanded.

---

Shino winced as he witnessed the Uchiha's attempt at psychological warfare. While it was a valid tactic in many circumstances, this wasn't one he'd personally recommend.

When the examiner said "Begin!" there was a green blur of motion that ended in a loud crack.

Naruto was standing in the space formerly occupied by the Uchiha, fist extended. Shino noticed that his eyes were a much darker shade of blue than normal, almost a deep purple.

As for Sasuke, he was flying backwards, landing in a boneless heap three and a half meters behind his starting position. There was a large lump already forming on the side of his jaw as he bounced once before sliding to a halt. To Shino's untrained eye, it was quite apparent that the last Uchiha had sustained a broken jaw.

Gekkou Hayate stared at the clearly unconscious boy as the one who struck him turned and began marching toward the exit. Clearing his throat, he announced, "Winner, Uzumaki Naruto."

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Naruto knew the way to the infirmary now, so he made much better time on his second trip. Kurenai-sensei was still waiting near the surgery unit, so he sat down beside her. She looked at the clock and frowned.

"I fought Sasuke," he said as he sat down.

She sighed, patted him awkwardly on the shoulder, and went back to staring at the clock.

After nearly twenty minutes, Naruto was about to climb the walls. His fidgeting grew noisier and noisier until Kurenai gave him a sharp look and he forcibly stilled himself. Looking away, he saw Shino leading Gai-sensei and a wobbly-looking Lee.

"The matches are concluded," Shino said with no preamble, "I will share my observations as needed. How is our comrade?"

"No word yet," Naruto answered with a frown.

An attendant approached Gai and over his protests Lee was led away for an x-ray. Naruto wondered why Sasuke hadn't been brought down here, or whether he'd be treated on the spot. Maybe he should have hit him harder.

A moment later, Gai returned and nodded to Kurenai. "Thank you for the information regarding that Sand genin. Lee had to fight him and even with the Celestial Gates open, he could not land a decisive blow. Without our extra endurance training I'm not sure he could have fought as long as he did."

"What happened to Lee?" Naruto asked.

"When the fires of Lee's Youth began to run out of fuel, this Sabaku no Gaara was able to catch him a glancing blow with his sand and hurl him against the wall." Gai reported in a distressed voice. Naruto realized that seeing Lee unable to win, despite all his hard work, was physically painful for his sensei. "I… I was forced to intervene before he was severely injured."

"I'm sure Lee knows you did the right thing," Kurenai assured him, looking a bit uncomfortable herself.

"Yes, but when he is recovered we will run a thousand laps around Konoha, backward, on our hands!" Gai assured her.

Shino nodded to Naruto. "With that match, Kankuro from the Sand was not required to fight. I will share my observations on the others

as needed, but the matches for the next round in a month have already been selected. You will fight Hyuuga Neji."

Kurenai-sensei's eyes widened in surprise.

Naruto's disgruntlement over the Sand guy's luck dissipated as a beatific grin spread across his face.

Author Notes:

Gaara took a lot longer to reach the tower because he insisted that his team prowl around the forest for a while… he was hoping to run into that jinchuuriki he encountered on the rooftop before the exam.

Chouji fought a little better than he did in canon because he went first – and didn't have time to be intimidated watching everyone else fight. And Yoroi's technique is a *really* bad match-up against the infamous Akimichi Meatball Tank. He wasn't fast enough to use a touch-jutsu and get away without getting crunched.

At over 11,000 words, I was so tempted to end the chapter when they announced Naruto's match, but I'd like to live to see the New Year.

(Bibliophile's Beta note: and I thought he should have ended the chapter there, too, but after a bit of thought, I have to agree that this works out better)

As always, mucho thanks to my betas, Runsamok and Bibliophile.

And a final reminder, since it's been a while since this was brought up. This is an AU story, and the divergence point occurs well before chapter one begins. More will be revealed about it later, but that means that some characters will not act exactly as they did in canon. Some of the differences will be very apparent, some will be more subtle. But if someone is acting different than what you expect, that's probably why.

# A Wretched Recovery

Chapter 15

Chapter 15

Hinata awoke in a haze of pain. Her chest ached so much it took an act of will just to inhale. The air she inhaled was redolent of medicinal smells. She almost choked on the cloying odors, but just imagining how much coughing would hurt made her throat relax.

She cracked open sleep-gummed eyes to see a hand wreathed in glowing blue-green chakra rest lightly on the blanket over her sternum. As the glow flared the pain eased, just a little. After a moment, she realized she was in a hospital.

Then she remembered the fight with Neji. No matter how hard she tried, no matter how determined she was, she still couldn't defeat her cousin.

She'd been so hopeful going into that fight. She'd trained so hard, learned so many new things. This was her chance to prove that she had changed, just a little. But in the end, her father was right. She was nothing but a stain on the main family. Better that she'd died and left no reminder of her legacy of failures.

For that matter, she was honestly surprised she'd survived. Her last memory was Neji charging at her in response to her final words. She'd already recognized the signs of internal injuries and known that her hard work had been for nothing, just like the rest of her meaningless life. But she'd wanted to leave her cousin with… something besides the bitterness that she could see was consuming him. It wasn't his fault she was a weakling born into his proper place within the clan.

Trying to remember was so hard, but she thought there might have been a familiar surge of chakra and a sense of… motion? Everything else was blackness.

Hinata tried to shift a little under the starchy hospital bedding, but a renewed surge of pain demonstrated the folly of that. She hadn't even managed to die with honor… after publicly demonstrating that the Hyuuga branch family was stronger than the main family. It didn't matter that Neji was a year older; her father's daughter should have prevailed. Instead, she had publicly humiliated him.

Hinata let her eyes fall closed and wished for the death she'd been denied.

---

Naruto didn't know which was worse, waiting at the hospital or waiting at home. He supposed he should be grateful that Kurenai-sensei made the decision for him. She sent him home under orders after three days of waiting for Hinata to wake up. He supposed he was getting a little ripe, but she'd also ordered him to stay out of the hospital until she sent for him.

He and Shino were excused from missions to prepare for the Chuunin exam finals. His teammate was planning to spend most of his time working with his parents in their specialties, but for once Naruto didn't really feel like training.

He'd become so used to practicing with Hinata that it felt... wrong… somehow to train without her.

Maybe it was a good thing that Gai wasn't really giving him any choice in the matter. He and Lee were waiting for him outside his apartment when he woke up the next morning.

For once, Gai wasn't his normal, completely over the top self. Instead, he somewhat somberly informed Naruto that Kurenai wished to be on hand when Hinata woke up. Naruto nodded when he heard that – she'd assured him that she or Iruka-sensei would be

there for her. But then Gai went on to say that Naruto's warning about Sabaku no Gaara prevented Lee from being seriously injured during their match. Thus, they owed Naruto a debt of honor and would discharge this obligation by helping him fan the fires of his youth in preparation for the finals.

Naruto noticed that neither of them mentioned Neji. He wasn't about to bring up the bastard either.

But if he thought early mornings with the Gai and Lee show were strenuous, adding noon and evening sparring sessions was downright insane. And even if he managed to tire Lee out, Gai would have him do cool-downs while he 'tested Naruto's power of youth' himself. The first time this happened, Naruto realized what a pachinko ball felt like.

But it did keep him from worrying about his teammate. Gai-sensei worked him so hard the rest of that first week that each night he fell asleep the instant his head hit the pillow.

---

Shino spun the kamas in his hands as he settled into a modified back stance. While the motions served no intrinsic purpose, they did demonstrate a degree of manual dexterity and expertise that could serve to intimidate potential foes. While normally it was better to conceal one's capabilities, there were circumstances in which overt demonstrations can achieve mission objectives without necessitating excessive violence.

Not that there weren't occasions in which violence was preferable. Not for the last time, he envied Naruto's opponent selection in the upcoming finals.

Irrational behavior was not something appreciated by any Aburame and Shino was no exception to this. When that behavior resulted in serious injury to his teammates, he found himself desiring a role in undertaking the appropriate corrective action.

While there was a slim probability that he would meet Neji in the finals, Naruto would first have to lose to the Hyuuga prodigy, something he did not wish to see happen. Aside from the implications for team morale, he did not think Naruto would let anything stop him short of death or incapacitating injury.

But if the worst happened, he would be ready. He cleared his mind and began the next kata, his blades a blur of motion.

---

The third Hokage set aside the scroll he was reading with a sigh. It was the third petition he'd received in a week concerning the results of the preliminary matches. Each was worded differently, but they all suggested, in various diplomatic terms, that he 'adjust' the results to address some 'obvious errors'.

Oddly enough, none of the apparent authors of these missives were shinobi – though he was certain at least one of them may have been prompted by one of the major clans. He noticed a certain turn of phrase, "uphold the honor of Konohagakure," that sounded a lot like Hyuuga Hiashi. But for the most part, shinobi took the rank examinations very seriously. Indeed, their own status was based upon fitness certified by these tests. Showing any sort of favoritism threw the whole system into question.

But to other residents of the village, the rank exams were political exercises. He himself explained that to the examinees a week ago. The performance of the genin reflected glory on their home village. Strong shinobi implied a strong village – which meant more and better contracts in the future. But the civilians also understood clan politics and prestige as well. In previous generations, the Uchiha Clan had helped carry Konoha to glory and prosperity. The loss of almost every member of that clan was a blow that was only dwarfed by the attack of the Kyuubi nearly a decade before that. The fact that Konoha still retained a surviving heir was some consolation, and it suited many peoples' sense of appropriateness that the sole remaining Uchiha showed signs of great skill and ability.

To such people, Uchiha Sasuke's elimination in the preliminary round was practically a blow to their personal aspirations. No matter that it was almost unheard of for a rookie genin to pass the Chuunin Exam – it was only due to their skill that he and his team were even allowed to enter. Such people, ignorant of why the examination must be rigorous, wished to see the rules bent for their favorite. That way, they could continue to boast of the invincible Uchiha genius that was the pride of their village.

The Sandaime shook his head ruefully. To the genin's credit, he didn't think Sasuke would accept any favors, even if they were offered. By all reports, Hatake Kakashi was training his team harder than ever after they were eliminated from the Chuunin Exam – and only Uchiha Sasuke had refrained from commenting on the grueling pace. Any appearance of coddling or favoritism now would only inflame his wounded pride. For that matter, this whole situation may have been a good thing for Team Seven's sensei as well. Yuuhi Kurenai was not given to excessive boasting, but he was sure she'd made at least a few pointed remarks to the colleague that seemed to exasperate her most.

It probably didn't help that the one who defeated the Uchiha prodigy was the village pariah. One of the more offensive messages he'd received argued that of course Naruto had to have drawn on the demon caged within him to beat the Uchiha. Thus it was only fair that he be disqualified and the victory awarded to Sasuke. Even putting aside the issue of how to explain such a decision to the genin without violating his own rule, the Hokage was offended that they thought Naruto could use the demon's chakra without anyone noticing. Kage aside, high-ranking ninja from more than one village had been watching the matches with considerable interest. Did that simpleton think no one had even considered the possibility?

Not for the first time, the Hokage wondered if it was such a good idea to let non-shinobi citizens have such a large say in the running of the village. Starting during his first term, and continued during the Fourth's reign, the civilians and village council were encouraged to

take a more active role in managing Konoha than was typical in a hidden village.

These greater freedoms and political stakes had paid off in many ways. Konoha's economy was much more active and robust than usual for a ninja village. This went hand in hand with a steadily increasing population and higher quality of life. But at the same time, these newly empowered villagers had been given the power to ask inappropriate questions, the power to poke their noses into things that were really not their concern.

More than once he'd discussed the ramifications of what they were doing with his successor. But every time Sarutobi started to question the wisdom of their course, the blond-haired man who would sacrifice everything for Konoha stayed firm in his convictions. He'd reminisce about infiltration missions he'd taken to Iwakagure and how the common villagers lived in fear of their shinobi. They had no rights under the harsh laws of Stone and their lives reflected this. "The farther away we are from their path," he insisted, "the better off we are." Amazingly, the Iwa leadership still didn't understand why their villagers were only half as productive as those of their rival in the Land of Fire.

It was painful irony indeed that those villagers would use that freedom to persecute the Yondaime's legacy, but the old man supposed it was inevitable. Giving people freedom meant also giving them the freedom to behave foolishly. He shook his head wearily. At least he could accord this latest proposal with all the respect it deserved, he thought as he dropped it into a wastebasket.

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The second time Hinata regained consciousness, the pain was much less than it had been before. She could now take shallow breaths without stabbing pains that seemed to go right through her. The skin of her face felt cool and her eyes were clear of secretions. Someone had recently wiped her face with a damp cloth. She willed her eyes to focus, trying to make out details in the dimly lit hospital room.

"Hinata?" a voice quietly spoke.

She shifted her eyes in the direction of the sound, making out a vague profile that looked like her sensei. This was getting a little frustrating. Her constant failures aside, Hinata was used to having fairly acute vision – it was a legacy of the Byakugan that almost no Hyuuga suffered from normal vision defects.

The figure took a step forward and she could see that it was, in fact, her sensei. "Don't try to use your eyes," she said in a somber voice. "Your bed is under a chakra suppressing seal. Some of your inner coils were damaged and the medic-nins don't want to risk a rupture before they are fully repaired."

Hinata let out a tiny sigh. The fact that such extreme measures had to be taken only underlined how badly she'd failed. "I'm sorry," she said in a very small voice.

Kurenai-sensei nodded. "I know, but it's not just me you need to apologize to."

Hinata swallowed. "Yes. I humiliated my father."

"And I don't think you are sorry for the correct reasons," her sensei continued.

Hinata fell silent, looking at her teacher and feeling even more stupid and useless.

"You fought well," Kurenai said. "I and the other jonin-sensei were impressed by the gains you have made. Gai claims you have the 'youthful potential of genius', whatever that means."

For a moment, Hinata allowed herself to believe her sensei, and the sick weight of guilt on her spirit seemed to lighten for a moment. But the memory of her father's face brought her back to reality. No matter how well others might think she had done, she had failed to live up to the standards of her clan.

Kurenai leaned forward a little more and Hinata noticed that her expression was one of stern disapproval. "I do, however, find myself questioning your judgment."

"S-sensei?" she asked, hating herself for the quaver in her voice.

"At the end of the fight," she clarified, "when you kept getting up again. You couldn't even defend yourself at that point. Did you actually believe you still had a chance to defeat your cousin?"

Hinata thought back to that time. She'd been in so much pain that the idea of launching an attack was ludicrous, really. But she couldn't bear the thought of failing again, failing in front of everyone, her teacher, her teammates. Naruto. Staying down meant adding to her legacy of failures. She would not stay down. Not again. She'd rather…

Staring off into the distance, she glanced back at Kurenai-sensei's face and slowly shook her head.

"Were you trying to die?" Kurenai asked in a voice that was little more than a whisper.

Hinata stared at her teacher, those words freezing her in place. She tried to shake her head, to deny them, but she couldn't. At the time, she honestly would rather have died than live with such a failure. Ending it all was preferable to what would happen afterward… proving her father correct, again… seeing the disappointment in everyone's faces, no matter how hard they tried to hide it.

Evidently Hinata's lack of response was answer enough, because Kurenai-sensei sighed and leaned back in her chair. "That's what I thought," she said after a moment. "Hinata, you need to listen to me and pay close attention. Right now I'm not sure I will ever be able to certify you to return to active duty."

Hinata felt like her stomach was encased in a block of ice. "A-are my injuries that bad?" she asked.

"It's not your physical injuries I'm concerned about," Kurenai clarified. "It's your state of mind. I can't have someone on my team that places no value on her own life."

Hinata could only stutter out "I-I'm s-sorry, sensei."

Kurenai just shrugged. "I suppose it's more my fault than yours. I should have realized this sooner. I just thought you actually cared about your teammates."

That accusation tore through Hinata's heart like a kunai. "S-sensei!" she gasped with just a touch of outrage. She might be a perpetual failure, but no one could say she didn't care for her teammates. No one should be able to… she… she cared for them more than her family, at times. More than anything, really.

Kurenai cocked her head and peered down at Hinata, making her feel like one of Shino's new acquisitions. "Did you ever consider the effect that your death would have on them?" she asked. "Naruto was so worried about you that he nearly forfeited his match because he didn't want to leave the infirmary. Shino is just as upset, in his own way, and I understand that he made a public death threat against your cousin."

Hinata froze as her mind tried to wrap itself around this new information. To be honest, she didn't think Naruto would react so strongly, but she still damned herself for her thoughtlessness. No matter that she wasn't thinking clearly during the fight, too much was going on, too much was at stake. She'd forgotten her team in her rush to prove herself… to her father. Hyuuga or not, that was inexcusable.

But Kurenai wasn't finished. "And now Naruto will face Neji in his first match of the finals, and I'm fairly sure he intends to kill him – no matter if it disqualifies him. Shino doesn't care so much about his foes as the chance that he might face Neji as well… to avenge you. These are the people you forgot about when you faced your cousin.

These are the people that you thought wouldn't care if you got yourself killed."

Hinata felt something snap within her. Suddenly the bedclothes were too tight as she levered herself up on her elbows, ignoring the spasms of pain in her chest. "Why do they care?" she heard herself asking in a rasping growl that made her want to cough. "Why should anyone care if a failure like me dies? I'm useless! I'm worthless! I can't beat my cousin. I can't even beat my little sister! I never do anything right – it would be better if I was dead, or never even born, so they'd have someone useful in my place." Her rant dissolved in a flurry of coughing that left her curled on her side with a coppery taste flooding the back of her mouth.

She barely noticed a hand gripping her shoulder as the coughing subsided. "Who told you that you are worthless?" Kurenai asked in a softer voice.

Hinata tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come. She felt her face reddening. She was mortified by her outburst. What had possessed her to say such things, even if they were true? Kurenai-sensei would have no choice but to remove her from the team now. She would never get to see Naruto or Shino again.

As Hinata struggled to get her breathing under control again. Kurenai-sensei helped her sit up. Her sensei wiped a cloth across her lips that came away with a faint smear of pink. "Don't speak," Kurenai commanded her, "just nod. Did your father tell you these things?"

Hesitantly, Hinata nodded.

"That is no surprise to me. I find him to be a cruel and spiteful man," Kurenai said in an angry voice.

Hinata felt a surge of guilt because she didn't argue with her. Being the leader of the clan required him to be demanding at times, even harsh. But it was all for the good of the clan, wasn't it?

"You told me once that he has a very low opinion of Naruto," Kurenai continued. "Do you think he is correct in that hatred as well?"

Hinata shook her head, but frowned. Her father hardly knew Naruto, but he'd raised her from infancy. Surely he knew her better.

"I can see you are not convinced," Kurenai said with a sigh. "Who do you spend the most time with every day? You know the answer as well as I."

Hinata swallowed and nodded. Training with Naruto, hours each day, was something she'd only dreamed could happen when they attended the Konoha Ninja Academy. The thought of losing that if Kurenai-sensei removed her from the team was unthinkable.

"Good," Kurenai said. "Would Naruto agree with your father? And given how much time you spend with each other, who would you say has the more accurate estimation of your ability?"

Hinata froze in place, not even breathing for a moment. Unbidden, a memory of Naruto's words echoed through her mind, "Hinata, you rock!" She wanted to dismiss the question - she knew Naruto was nice to almost everyone. But was it possible that Naruto knew her better than her father? Maybe instead of being a constant failure, she did 'rock', even just a little?

Kurenai stood up. "I'll leave you to think on that, Hinata. I'll hold off on making any decisions regarding your status for now, but you should give serious thought to what we've talked about."

Hinata nodded slowly and lay back on the bed as her sensei faded into the shadows of the room. She barely heard the door open and close.

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"How much better your life would have been," Kurenai whispered as she closed the door, "if your father had died, instead of your mother."

She took a deep breath as she made her way down the corridor. The medicinal smells that clung to hospitals the world over made her faintly nauseous. Her mind replayed the look on Hinata's face when she'd delivered her ultimatum and her stomach rebelled. Only the iron self-control of a jonin kept her face expressionless as she made her way to the bathrooms. Once the door was closed and she was sure she was alone, Kurenai bolted for one of the stalls and promptly emptied her stomach.

Wiping her mouth, she tried to forget the desolate look in her student's eyes, the raw, writhing emotion on the girl's face when she regurgitated her father's hateful words. Tears stung in red eyes that had spurned such things in years gone by.

Cruel necessities, no matter how needful, were still cruel.

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Hyuuga Neji fell back into a ready stance, waiting for his teacher to attack. He had been informed, the day after the preliminary matches, that Hiashi-sama would be taking personal charge of his training in the month leading up to the finals. Gai-sensei accepted this with barely more than a nod. His jonin-instructor had been rather cool toward him since the match with his cousin. While highly skilled, Maito Gai did not understand how things worked within the Hyuuga clan, nor did he appear to care.

Neji was acutely aware of the unusual interest his uncle expressed in his development, leading to his inclusion in training normally only given to main family members. This led to some very discreet whispering among the Hyuuga elders, but Neji's growing prowess silenced any complaints. Being the top rookie of his year was an accomplishment, even for a Hyuuga. Not even his cousin in the main family had managed that.

Neji suppressed a twinge as Hiashi-sama lunged toward him. He spun into a picture-perfect Jyuuken block – nothing less would have sufficed. Thinking about the match with Hinata made him… uncomfortable. Aside from his lapse in composure at the end, it had

suitably showcased his capabilities. A main family ninja once considered the heir to the clan had only landed one significant blow before she was defeated. He smoothly slid into a counterstrike his teacher avoided with ease. Neji's anger in response to her inappropriate words at the end of the match was far overshadowed by her own emotional displays. Her almost desperate desire to defeat him was inappropriate for a shinobi representing a clan that prided itself on having firm emotional control. The Uchiha insanity would not strike at the foremost of Konoha's shinobi clans.

Hiashi's last strike wasn't fully deflected and Neji felt the muscles in his forearm burn as a bruise formed. He neither knew nor cared why Hinata was so desperate to beat him, nor why she had kept getting up after her defeat was sealed along with her tenketsu. But he knew he had done nothing wrong. Her own father had commended him on his performance in the preliminary matches, and Neji knew he was less than pleased with hers. Not only had he not been to the hospital, but he forbade any other clan members from seeing her before she was released. Neji knew that some branch family members, especially women who had known her mother, privately expressed sympathy for the discarded heir. Of course, a true heir would scorn such expressions of useless sentiment.

Back on the attack, Neji began another combo, but hesitated slightly on the last blow, hoping his teacher's block would follow the normal timing. It almost worked, but all he ended up with was a bruised wrist as Hiashi turned the blow aside. That earned a slight nod from the clan leader – his was an acceptable variation on traditional forms, unlike all the *tricks* Hinata had used to try and beat him… something he knew Hiashi-sama was less than pleased to learn of.

Still, the reactions of his peers were somewhat disquieting. Lee, while little more than a parody of their jonin-instructor, was still competent within his limited range of capabilities. Moreover, Tenten was one of the more accomplished kunoichi of their generation. Their defeats in the preliminaries were due to unfortunate match-ups rather than lack of ability. Each faced an opponent that possessed

skills that effectively neutralized their specialties. For that matter, it was Hinata's fate to meet a more competent Jyuuken user in her match.

But both of them had exhibited the same quiet disapproval as Gai-sensei, as if he had done something wrong or shameful. It was unfortunate that they did not seem to understand how things worked in the real world. If you fought someone stronger, you were destined to lose, and railing against the nature of things would only lead to worse injury. He learned that lesson the last time he saw his father alive. The only way to avoid this was to harden one's heart and become as strong as possible. Anything else was foolishness, and being a shinobi allowed no room for such things. If they could not come to understand this, then he would be forced to request a transfer once he became a chuunin.

It was interesting to note that Tenten, before shunning him along with the others, did see fit to warn him that Hinata's teammates were extremely angry about the injuries he'd inflicted during her defeat. Both would likely seek revenge when he faced them. Neji thanked her for the information, but didn't consider it very important. They would face him and, angry or not, they would be defeated.

It was their fate.

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Naruto couldn't suppress a twinge of nervousness when Kurenai appeared at the end of his morning session with Gai and Lee. It took some effort not to rush through Gai's cool-down exercises and go see what Kurenai-sensei wanted, but he ground his teeth and stuck to the routine. Gai-sensei had lectured both him and Lee on the importance of both stretching and doing proper cool-downs, and making him repeat that lecture would only delay things more.

Finally, when they were dismissed, Naruto hustled over to see his jonin-sensei.

"I see you are still improving," she said in an approving tone that made Naruto's face heat up, just a little.

"I'm still trying to catch up to Lee," he said honestly. Despite his loss to Gaara in the preliminary match, Lee still dominated the beginnings of their sparring sessions, putting Naruto on the defensive until his greater stamina came into play. Considering that Sabaku no Gaara had done the same, according to Shino, Naruto worried, just a little.

"If that is the standard by which you choose to measure yourself, then I think you will continue to improve," Kurenai replied. "Gai-sensei's offer to train you this much is very generous. Make the most of this for now. I will concentrate on gathering as much information as possible on the opponents you and Shino will face in the finals, especially this Gaara person. Closer to the matches we will meet to work out what strategies and techniques will prove most effective."

It took a moment for Naruto to digest that. His sensei was being especially enigmatic today. Finally, he just nodded to acknowledge her words. He missed her team training sessions but she had a point. Plus it would be a little awkward since he and Shino might end up fighting each other at some point. Anyway, finding out how to beat Gaara would be worth it, let alone Neji.

"I thought you would want to know that Hinata is well enough to receive visitors today," his teacher announced, pulling him out of his reverie.

Naruto smiled with relief. "Can we go see her now?" he asked quickly.

Kurenai nodded and they began walking toward the center of town. On a sudden impulse, Naruto created a shadow clone and handed it some money. "A double order of miso ramen to go - meet us at the hospital," he ordered. As the clone sped off, he called after it. "It's for Hinata, so stay out of it!"

When he turned back to his sensei, she had a curious expression on her face. "You've certainly become rather… casual… with that technique," she observed.

Naruto shrugged. "It's useful sometimes. And the more I practice it, the better I seem to get with it. Besides, I know that hospital food sucks."

"I don't disapprove," Kurenai-sensei said, "I just don't think most jonin have considered uses for that technique outside of missions. And how do you know about hospital food?"

Naruto shrugged. "I was in there once when I was a kid. I think a brick fell on my head or something, I don't remember very well. The only thing I do remember clearly is wanting to get out of there because the food tasted awful."

Kurenai-sensei nodded thoughtfully and they were quiet until they reached the hospital. An annoyed-looking clone was waiting for them, holding a bag. "Konohamaru almost popped me and spilled this," the clone growled as it handed Naruto the food. "I told the brat that if he ruined Hinata-chan's food with one of his games, she'd let the missing-nins keep him next time."

Naruto made a face when the clone dispersed itself and he received the memories. "What a potty-mouth," he muttered. He hoped no one saw him chewing out the Hokage's grandson like that.

When he turned back, Kurenai-sensei had the oddest expression on her face.

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Any worries about foul-mouthed clones disappeared from Naruto's mind when he saw his teammate lying on a hospital bed. He'd always thought of Hinata as strong – he wasn't kidding when he said she kicked butt as a ninja. But seeing her like this… she was so small. Had someone done a shrinking jutsu on her? Or did she just look bigger in his memories?

He supposed it was the latter, because he was also struck by how still she was. She appeared to be napping, with only the motion of her slow breaths keeping him from thinking the worst. A sudden spike of white-hot rage bloomed in the pit of his stomach. He was going to make Neji pay for hurting her.

He supposed he must have released a little of that 'killing intent' stuff Kurenai had explained to them about, because Hinata's eyes suddenly popped open. Embarrassed, he quickly stifled his anger. He didn't want to upset Hinata or make her feel worse.

"N-Naruto?" she asked in a thick voice as she sat up and rubbed at her eyes.

For an instant Naruto was struck by how cute she looked doing that, scrubbing at her eyes with the back of her hand like a little kid – nothing like the graceful kunoichi that sparred with him. He shook his head. She wouldn't appreciate him making fun of her either. "I brought ramen!" he announced after an awkward pause, holding up the bag. Hinata blinked. The nurses had eyed his burden rather dubiously as they exited the elevator, but Kurenai-sensei did that scowling-but-not-really-scowling thing and they didn't say anything.

Hinata gave him a tremulous smile as Naruto carefully placed the bag on her bed-side table and opened it. He carefully handed her the covered container and a pair of chopsticks. She straightened up a little more, smoothing the blankets, and then peered at the bag. "Aren't you going to have some?" she asked.

"Nah," Naruto said, "I'm not really hungry."

Hinata froze in place, staring at him.

"Er, I mean, that is," Naruto babbled quickly, "I'm going to get some later. I just got done sparring with Lee and I need to let my stomach settle. You know that lotus thing, right?"

Hinata nodded slowly and then cracked open the container. The reek of medicinal smells and disinfectants was swept away by the fragrant steam of hot ramen broth. Naruto considered this a vast improvement and his salivary glands agreed. Next time he was going to find a way to sneak in an order big enough for both of them to eat. Trying to distract himself from his annoying stomach, he glanced at the bag and noticed it wasn't completely empty.

"Hey," Naruto said as he pulled a folded piece of paper from the bag. "Ayame stuck a note in there. It says she hopes you get well soon. Isn't that-"

His words cut off when he looked back at Hinata and saw her lower lip trembling. Her head bent forward as her hands began to shake. Naruto rescued the ramen and put it back on the table as she sniffed loudly. "Hinata? What's wrong? Is it the-"

His words were cut off when Hinata let out a low cry and buried her face in her hands.

Naruto looked back at Kurenai-sensei for help, but the jonin was no longer standing in the doorway. The door itself was closed, and he considered going to get a nurse for help, but he didn't think Hinata would appreciate that. He remembered how Ayame took Hinata aside to help her get cleaned up. He needed to help her without embarrassing her worse. He had to. This was his friend.

It would really help if he'd known what to do. He gingerly sat on the edge of the bed and awkwardly patted her shoulder, but that seemed to have no effect. "Neh, Hinata, it's okay?" he asked, feeling like a complete idiot. Why didn't they cover this in the Academy? Most of the boys in his class ended up teamed with a girl, and girls cried, right? Why didn't Iruka-sensei tell us what to do when that happened? Maybe that psychologist guy was supposed to tell us that privately and he screwed me there too.

"Hinata, don't cry!" he finally said, surprising himself with the pleading tone that came out of his mouth. He really hated this. He

hated seeing her upset, almost as much as seeing her hurt. Neji was going home from the finals in a damn body bag if he could manage it. No. He didn't need to be angry right now. That wouldn't help. He tried patting her back, but that didn't help either. She was shaking like leaf.

"I'm sorry," Hinata wailed. And suddenly her hands were fisted in the material of his jacket as she held onto him like she was drowning and he was a life preserver.

"For what?" Naruto asked, feeling stupid. He felt like he was only getting about half of this conversation. The patting wasn't working. That wasn't a surprise, since she wasn't Akamaru. I am an idiot, he thought. It wasn't working. What was wrong with his brain? Hinata was still crying. He gingerly settled his forearms across her shoulders in a kinda, sorta hug. Twisted around like this wasn't very physically comfortable… which was fine because it wasn't comfortable in any other way, either.

If anything, Hinata's crying got worse.

Naruto would have let go, possibly even gone to get a nurse. But now Hinata had somehow wrapped one of her arms around his back, exerting enough pressure to give Lee's turnip-planting jutsu a run for its money.

So instead he mostly just sat there, half twisted around, as the weeping sounds slowly abated. Hinata took a great, shuddering breath that suddenly exploded into a fit of coughing. She let go of his waist as she doubled over, but one hand was still holding onto his jacket, shaking as it held her up.

Naruto twisted around and grabbed a cloth from the table, holding it out for Hinata to grab. She held it up to her mouth as the coughs made her whole body spasm. When she brought the cloth away from her mouth, Naruto saw a flash of red and wanted to kill her cousin all over again.

But at least she was breathing easier now. Her voice was only a little rough when she quietly thanked him.

Naruto helped her lay back on the bed and fussed with the covers, trying to straighten them. "Do I need to get a nurse?" he asked in a worried tone.

"No," she answered in a small voice. "One of the Jyuuken strikes hit my lung and caused a rupture. It's healing, but there are blood clots loosening. The doctor says the treatments are softening them as well, but coughing them up naturally is the best way to expel them."

"Oh," Naruto said. That was really kind of gross. He wondered how Neji would like it if Naruto just pulled one of his lungs out through his nose. That would probably be even more disgusting though. Better think of something else before Hinata thought *she* was grossing him out. "I don't really understand what you have to be sorry for," he continued.

Hinata went very still and Naruto wanted to kick himself. "I was very selfish," she said after a moment. "I… when I fought Neji."

Naruto scowled. "Don't worry, Hinata, I'm going to beat him like a drum."

Hinata shook her head. "Kurenai-sensei is disappointed in me… I…"

"No way!" Naruto interrupted. "You were great! You fought so hard, everyone was impressed! I loved it when you nailed him with one of your weights! He looked like he swallowed his tongue when you did that!"

"But I still failed," Hinata said, looking down at her hands clasped in front of her. Naruto could see her knuckles whitening. "I was so ashamed of my failure… I think I kept getting up when I had no chance to beat him… because I would rather have been killed than lose again. I… I wasn't thinking about anyone but myself."

Naruto stared at his friend as his mouth slowly fell open.

"I wanted to let you know now… in case…," she swallowed. "In case Kurenai-sensei has me removed from the team."

"No!" Naruto snarled. Hinata flinched and her wide eyes snapped up to meet his. "I won't let her!"

"Naruto-kun!" Hinata gasped and in the pale red glow on the blankets he realized that the red chakra was beginning to show. It seemed to be appearing more and more often lately, usually when he thought about the preliminary matches.

Naruto took a deep breath and tried to calm himself. "I'll talk to Kurenai-sensei," he said after a moment. He was proud of the evenness of his tone. "I'll get Shino to help if I have to. No one wins an argument with him."

Hinata shook her head. "No, it's all right-"

"No, it's not all right," Naruto said, some heat creeping back into his voice. "You're part of our team, and we're not going to just give up on you. You belong with us. We'll make her see that."

With that, Naruto spun and marched out of the room. It was pretty rude, but he had to leave before he said something worse. How the hell could Kurenai-sensei say that to her?

He took no note of the nurses and doctors as he left the hospital, though he did notice more than a few people hurrying to get out of his way. He supposed he shouldn't have been surprised to see his sensei standing just outside the entrance.

"She told you," Kurenai said. It wasn't a question.

"Yeah, she did," Naruto spat. "Sensei, how could-"

Kurenai cut him off with a sharp gesture. "This is better discussed elsewhere. Meet me at our normal training area," she ordered, and

then disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Naruto wouldn't have been surprised to learn that he'd set a new personal record for traversing the roofs of Konoha. It felt good, in a way, to exercise after what he'd just heard. Using his muscles as hard as he could gave vent to at least some of his more violent emotions.

Kurenai-sensei was standing in the middle of the clearing, so Naruto hurtled out of the trees to land next to her. She didn't even flinch, but began speaking even as he straightened up.

"You are upset about what you have learned," she began.

"Yes, Sensei," Naruto agreed. "How could you even think of threatening to remove her from the team?" he asked. The sheer injustice of it all made his hands shake. He wanted to hate his teacher for a moment, but she wouldn't just do something like that for no reason, would she?

"Would you rather see Hinata removed from the team or dead?" Kurenai asked flatly.

Naruto froze.

"It's a very serious question," Kurenai continued. "I wouldn't be free to discuss this if she hadn't already told you, but her behavior during the match gives me reason to be very concerned. Determination is all well and good, but such disregard for her own well-being is not acceptable."

"She just wanted to win," Naruto objected. "She wanted to do her best in the exam."

"She practically dared her cousin to kill her," Kurenai disagreed. "In a rank test. No lives were on the line. The village's safety was not at risk. But she considered her own survival unimportant."

Naruto stood there, his sensei's words striking him like clubs. Thinking back over her match, he remembered wishing she'd stay down as Neji continued to pummel her, until finally the older Hyuuga had appeared ready to end her life before Naruto's substitution technique yanked her out of the way.

He took a deep breath and looked up at the noonday sky. He thought back to a conversation he and Shino had shared in their tent during the border patrol mission. "This has something to do with her screwed up family, doesn't it?" he finally asked.

"I'm fairly certain it does," Kurenai confirmed.

Naruto made a face. He suddenly had a bad taste in his mouth. He spit on the grass.

"Do you really think she should be placed in life and death situations unless this is resolved?" she asked.

Naruto shook his head.

"What are you planning on doing?" Kurenai asked as he began striding away.

"I don't know yet," was his honest answer.

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Naruto was a mess during his noon-time session with Gai-sensei, and Lee nearly knocked him unconscious during their first spar. Eventually, Gai ended it early. Naruto apologized to the taijutsu specialist, but Gai merely waved it off. "It is clear," he said in his booming voice, "that the fires of your youth need to be banked, Naruto. Come back tomorrow when your mind and spirit are as one and you have regained your youthful focus."

Naruto didn't know if Kurenai-sensei had said something to Gai-sensei or not, but he thought the green-clad jonin was awfully

optimistic about his problem-solving abilities. At the moment, he didn't have a clue as to what he should do.

After a quick lunch, Naruto found himself sitting on top of the Hokage monument. He looked out over Konoha and thought about the situation. No matter how many times he tried, he just couldn't seem to wrap his head around the differences between how Hinata was and how she saw herself. She didn't really think she'd done that well in the preliminary match, but everyone who knew her was impressed by what they saw. Why was it so different?

Eventually, he decided to head back and just ask her. It wasn't like his blundering mouth could make things any worse than they were.

Naruto arrived back at the hospital just in time to see Shino walking out of the entrance. He immediately changed his plans and intercepted his teammate.

"You have spoken to Hinata," Shino said with no preamble.

Naruto nodded. "You?" he asked.

"She has apologized to me as well for her… thoughtlessness," Shino replied. Naruto didn't even need to look up to know the forehead over those dark glasses was furrowed.

"Remember what we talked about on the patrol mission?" Naruto asked him.

Shino nodded. "That appears to be the most likely origin of our present situation."

Naruto gritted his teeth. He knew better than most that Shino's emotionless voice was not an accurate gauge of his teammate's real feelings. "So what are we going to do about it?" he asked.

"Do?" Shino asked. "I am not sure this is a situation we are qualified to deal with."

"We can't do nothing!" Naruto protested.

"Our instructor will undertake the proper corrective action," Shino said. "There are professionals better equipped to deal with this situation than we are."

"They'd probably remove her from the team first!" Naruto hissed, struggling to keep his voice down. "That would *kill* her. Maybe for real."

Shino just looked at him for a long moment. Naruto had learned how to tell, glasses or not. "You are highly agitated about this," he said after a moment.

"This is Hinata," Naruto said. "She's our teammate. We need to look out for her. *We* need to fix this. Not some assholes like the guy that tried to screw me up."

Shino was silent for a long time. "I have observed," he finally said after a while, "that our teammate is highly affected by your words, including intonation as well as phraseology and context."

Naruto blinked.

"She listens very closely to what you say," Shino clarified. "You, more than anyone."

"More than Kurenai-sensei?" Naruto asked in stark disbelief. "Why?"

"More than anyone," Shino confirmed. "It would be inappropriate for me to speculate regarding issues in which I do not have first hand knowledge. But that is what I have observed. I believe that you would be best suited to interact with Hinata in an effort to satisfactorily resolve this situation."

"Damn," Naruto said. "I was hoping she'd listen to you better."

Shino went very still. "And why is that?" he asked.

"Because you're smarter than me," Naruto replied. "I'll probably just make things worse."

"I do not believe that raw intelligence is the most important factor in resolving interpersonal issues," Shino declared. "I theorize that if you simply ask questions and listen attentively you will experience a greater degree of success than you anticipate."

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Hinata felt better after Shino left. He accepted her admission of selfishness without batting an eye – that she could see anyway – and stated that he too was impressed by her performance. Furthermore, he did not wish to see her removed from Team Eight either. He said her conduct and capabilities were well above average for their cohort, and the team social interactions had proven to be more enjoyable than he had considered possible. He concluded that removing a key component from the matrix was neither necessary nor desirable.

Hinata accepted his words as they were spoken. It wasn't like Shino to whitewash a situation just to be nice. He was too precise for that. But still, remembering the disappointment in Kurenai-sensei's voice seemed to sweep all that away. It was just the latest in a grand litany of failures.

She wondered if she'd even be admitted back into the clan if she was rejected as a ninja. Probably not.

She jumped a little when the door opened and Naruto walked in. She had to firmly clasp her hands to keep from pushing her fingertips together in her nervous habit. She was a little mortified when she remembered how she broke down in front of him earlier. At least she'd been able to maintain her composure around Shino.

Naruto was silent as he carefully pulled up a chair and sat down next to her bed. She wanted to open her mouth, to say something, to apologize, to do something. But no words would come. Instead, she found herself staring at his face. No matter that it was rude and

unmannerly, something her father would abhor, she just couldn't help it. Naruto, always so enthusiastic about everything, looked very different with such a somber expression. For a moment, she pictured him in the Hokage's robes again and felt a chill go down her spine.

"There's a lot going on here that I don't understand," Naruto began, jolting Hinata out of her reverie. "I'm used to not knowing things. But now I can't accept that. I don't understand how you can see yourself so differently than everyone else sees you. I don't understand why you… " he paused and swallowed. "Why you seem to hate yourself. Something is not right."

Hinata looked down. She didn't need Naruto to tell her she was defective. An unpleasant voice in the back of her mind said that it was about time Naruto saw the truth of things. Now maybe she would stop wasting her time…

Motion caught her eye and she looked up to see Naruto leaning forward, peering intently at her. He cocked his head in a manner eerily reminiscent of their sensei. "And I do not think that something is you, Hyuuga Hinata," he said, imitating Kurenai-sensei when she wanted to make a point.

Hinata froze, her mouth half-way open, the protests dying on her tongue as bright blue eyes bored into hers.

"I was an orphan," Naruto said after a moment, leaning back in his chair. "I don't really know what it's like to have a family, but I always wanted one. I always wondered what it would be like to have parents or a brother or sister. Maybe I had some idealized image of family, because I knew I'd never have one. Shino's parents seem kind of neat. But now I'm starting to wonder if I might have been better off in some ways."

Naruto's words tore at Hinata. She knew how lonely he'd been at times in the past. She knew now that he was ostracized because of the seal he bore. "Naruto… I…"

"Tell me about the Hyuugas," Naruto said, his tone gentle but firm.

Hinata found she could deny him nothing. She began speaking.

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Naruto left the hospital two hours later, his head spinning. He felt like he'd sat through one of Kurenai's mega-lectures, only less organized. He'd had a glance into the life of one of Konoha's most prestigious clans, but he didn't really like what he saw.

The factual details were interesting. He had no idea there were that many feast days recognized in the Land of Fire, many of which required some sort of formal dinner. He had no idea the Hyuuga compound was as large as it was, and that there were several buildings set farther back in the grounds for the branch family. Tea ceremonies sounded weird, but boring after you sat through your first one. Maybe Hinata was graceful enough to make it interesting to watch.

But it was the things that were missing that made him wonder. Shikamaru was always telling stories about his dad saying or doing something troublesome. Kiba always complained about his big sister trying to boss him around. But Hinata didn't really have any stories about her father or her sister. She had a few pleasant recollections of her mother that were faded with age, but those only highlighted the lack with respect to her still living family members. As far as he could tell, Hinata avoided them as much as possible, and none of them seemed to ever have a kind word for her.

But the real eye-opener came after Hinata had another coughing fit. As she wiped her mouth and drank a little water, Naruto muttered darkly about how he was going to kill Neji at the finals.

Hinata immediately began pleading with him not to, which puzzled Naruto. At first, he thought she was just being too nice. Then he thought she was just worried about him getting in trouble.

Then the truth came out and it stunk like an opened grave.

To get at the heart of it, Hinata had to go back all the way to when she was almost a baby. She vaguely remembered her uncle Hizashi, Neji's father, who acted very different than his twin brother. She remembered seeing her father hurt him once using the curse seal, and had to explain how the branch family members were branded with it on their foreheads to keep them under the control of the Hyuuga main family.

It took a moment for Naruto to digest this. More than a moment, actually. The branch family members were, in some ways, little better than slaves of the main family. He felt a twinge of sympathy for Neji that he ruthlessly extinguished.

Then Hinata told him about the kidnapping attempt that ended with her father killing the assailant – who turned out to be a diplomat from Kumokagure. Kumo demanded the life of the killer, but Hyuuga elders sent Hizashi in his brother's place, leaving Neji fatherless. Later, with his mother dead as well, Neji was informally adopted by his uncle and trained along with his daughters. But the boy was always cool toward those who controlled the seal placed on his forehead.

Neji turned out to be unusually talented, Hinata told him, which was painfully ironic given his birth into the branch family. The main family was supposed to be stronger and more skilled, but he quite obviously overshadowed Hinata even years ago when she was the heir.

He wondered as she spoke if this tension was related to other things as well. Maybe Hinata wasn't as skilled as Neji, but she was still pretty damn good at what she did. Why did they have to label her as a failure?

Naruto wondered if her father resented Hinata in some way related to that whole mess, blaming her for the loss of his brother. It was stupid, but he couldn't think of anything else. He was about to ask her when the nurse entered the room and coolly informed him that visiting hours were over.

Now he found himself walking aimlessly through the streets of Konoha, pondering a problem that he wasn't sure had a solution. He really needed to talk to someone, but he didn't feel right discussing what Hinata had told him. It was… private. Her telling him that stuff, it was really a measure of the trust she placed in him. She was hesitant enough telling him, Naruto was sure she'd be really embarrassed if someone else knew, and he didn't want to make her feel worse.

Naruto was thinking so hard that he didn't even notice Iruka calling out to him until the chuunin's hand fell on his shoulder. Startled, Naruto spun around, making Iruka stumble back. While he was well enough to help with the Chuunin Exam, Naruto's old instructor was still recovering from the serious injuries he'd sustained battling the missing-nin kidnappers. Without thinking, Naruto grabbed Iruka's wrist to steady him.

Iruka halted in mid-stumble, much to his apparent surprise. "That's quite a grip you have there, Naruto," he said in a pleased voice. He smiled. "Want some ramen? My treat?"

Naruto started to apologize, but then remembered that Gai-sensei had given him the rest of the day off. "Sure, Iruka-sensei!" Weighty problems or not, ramen was ramen.

It was a little early for the dinner rush, so they found Ichiraku's mostly unoccupied. "Eat all you want," Iruka said in a grand voice.

Naruto looked over at one of the first people to really believe in him. "Are you *sure* you're all right, Iruka-sensei?"

"I made a lot of money off of you at the preliminary matches," Iruka informed him with an uncharacteristically smug grin. "When your match with Sasuke was announced, I made as many bets as I could before it started, and most of the chuunin and jonin gave me ten to one odds. You should have seen their faces when you won!"

Naruto was a little annoyed that people had been so sure Sasuke would beat him, but for the most part he was happy for Iruka. People that believed in Uzumaki Naruto, future Hokage, should profit from it… especially at the expense of those who didn't. "If I'd known you were making bets, I'd have asked you to place some for me," he said sourly. "Maybe gone a little slower so you'd have time to place more."

Iruka chuckled and reached over to muss Naruto's hair. That gesture still made Naruto swallow heavily, which was the reason why Iruka was the only one he'd let get away with it. "Don't worry, I had enough time to wager all my back wages from when I was in the hospital."

Naruto felt his face redden. It meant something that Iruka, who was ordinarily very practical with expenditures, was willing to bet that much on him.

"I wish I'd been able to get in on that action," Old Man Ichiraku said as he handed them a couple of menus.

"I imagine there will be a lot of wagering on the finals," Iruka said as they placed their orders.

"True," the old man said, "but now everyone knows not to underestimate Naruto here, so the odds won't be as good."

Naruto could almost feel his head beginning to swell at those words. Only the thought of Kurenai-sensei's probable reaction kept his ego firmly under control.

Those thoughts were quickly dispelled by Teuchi's next question. "Is this Neji character Naruto has to fight next the one who beat Hinata?"

Naruto was fairly proud of his self-control. Not a word left his lips. Not a muscle moved in his face. It was just a coincidence that his chopsticks chose that moment to explode into a cloud of splinters.

Iruka shot a quick glance at Naruto before answering. "Yes, he hurt her pretty badly," he said quickly.

"Oh," the old ramen cook said, looking back and forth between Naruto and Iruka as the broth began to simmer. "How is she doing?" he asked with an uneasy expression.

"Better," Naruto said flatly.

"Is she allowed to have visitors now?" Iruka asked, seeming eager to change the subject.

Naruto nodded. "She started today," he said.

"Good," Iruka said with a smile. "I'll have to drop in and see how she's doing."

"She'd like that," Naruto said. He didn't add that she probably wouldn't have any visits from her family.

The conversation lapsed into a semi-comfortable silence as the old man prepared their orders. The ramen was as good as ever, but somehow it didn't taste quite right to Naruto. After his first bowl, Naruto sat back on the stool and glanced over at Iruka, who also seemed kind of quiet. "Sensei?" he asked after a moment, "have you ever had students who had problems?" Naruto struggled with how to do this. He needed to keep things as vague as possible to avoid giving away Hinata's secrets, but if he made them too general his questions would become meaningless.

"All my students have problems," Iruka assured him with a grin.

Naruto had no doubt he was at the top of that particular list. "I mean problems… problems at home."

Iruka looked thoughtful. "You mean with a family member?"

Naruto shrugged. "Or maybe problems with their family in general. I never had one so I was just curious." The excuse at the end was

probably unnecessary, but he wasn't taking any chances. Iruka didn't seem overly curious, so maybe it was working…

"That can be tough," Iruka said thoughtfully. "Usually, there really isn't anything we can do about the family, so I just try to make school as much of a haven as possible."

Naruto looked confused.

Iruka drank the last of his broth. "Sometimes if there is a lot of stress in the home, a student may find coming to class a welcome relief from that stress. If I think they don't really have anyone in their family they can talk to about their problems, I make sure they know that they can talk to me."

"Do they?" Naruto asked, genuinely curious. He thought about how Iruka always seemed to be the one who supervised when he was forced to clean up the results of one of his pranks. The odd question now and then just seemed a way to ease his boredom, but now Naruto had a feeling there was more to it. This looking underneath the underneath could be fun. When it didn't give him a headache.

"Sometimes," Iruka said philosophically. "There really isn't anything you can do to force the situation, you have to just let them know help is available and wait for them to ask for it."

"That kind of sucks," Naruto said, wrinkling his nose. Beating the crap out of Hinata's family sounded like a much better idea. The only problem was that he didn't think it would help.

"It does," Iruka said, turning toward him. "It's awkward and it's frustrating, and often you feel like an idiot wasting your time. But you keep trying because it's important."

"That's it?" Naruto asked. "You just make yourself available and hope they ask for help?" He needed something more active or he was likely to go nuts.

"Well," Iruka drawled, "you can try to make them feel as comfortable as possible. I always think, 'When in doubt, do the friendliest thing'. Sometimes little things mean more than you realize, and even little things can add up eventually."

Naruto was quiet for a while as he digested this. "Did you ever get the urge to go to their home and start knocking heads together?" he finally asked.

Iruka's sudden laughter startled them both. "Most of the time," he admitted after a moment. "Not that it would do any good."

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The next morning, Naruto showed up for his morning session with Gai and Lee determined to make up for his pitiful performance the day before. Instead of waiting for Lee to tire out, Naruto did his best to fight him to a standstill from the very beginning. Even as he accumulated a new set of bruises, Naruto chided himself for getting lazy. He'd gotten so used to his normal strategy with Lee that he wasn't pushing himself as hard as he could.

It also helped to have a way to vent the previous day's frustrations.

Lee's grin got wider and wider as Naruto continued to go on the offensive, and his taijutsu combinations became more and more elaborate. After a while Lee was doing things Naruto had never seen before, forcing him to block and counter on pure instinct. He realized after a moment that this was surprisingly fun.

Right up until Lee broke a bone in his forearm.

Naruto was blocking a punch to the face that suddenly turned into an off-angle kick intended to remove his head. There was loud crack, accompanied by a jolt of pain that made Naruto's whole arm go numb for a moment.

Naruto stumbled back, clutching his forearm. It was hot to the touch, but the blinding pain was already leaking away. Lee looked horrified,

so Naruto just gave him a tight grin. "Good one," he said after a moment, letting go of his arm and flexing the hand. The pain was little more than a dull ache now.

He stepped forward to resume sparring, but Gai-sensei was having none of that. He'd evidently heard the crack as well, and insisted that Naruto have his arm x-rayed immediately.

On the way to the hospital, the jonin explained the best way to counter Lee's move, even as he chastised his genin for 'letting the fires of his youth burn out of control'.

Lee looked so disconsolate that Naruto spoke without thinking. "That's okay. After all, I don't think Neji is going to take it easy on me."

Both of the spandex-clad shinobi looked distinctly uncomfortable and Naruto cursed his stupid mouth. They were silent the rest of the way to the emergency room.

The doctors were less than enthusiastic about treating Naruto, especially since he didn't seem to be in too much pain, but Gai was insistent. The x-rays revealed only a faint shadow on the ulna that looked to be a hairline fracture that had healed long before. The medic looked annoyed at Gai for wasting his time, but Gai just explained that Naruto had taken a heavy blow while fanning the fires of his youth, and fulfilling his youthful promise to Naruto's instructor meant making sure there was no serious damage. The doctor's eyes glazed over halfway through this explanation and he didn't even notice when Gai took the x-ray with him.

Naruto stared at the jonin as he and Lee followed him out of the hospital. Did he do that on purpose sometimes?

By the time they returned to the training area, it was almost time for the morning session to be over anyway. Gai had them do a couple of kata before beginning the cool-down exercises.

After he was dismissed, Naruto created some clones and then stopped by the Yamanaka flower shop to purchase a cluster of yellow chrysanthemum flowers. During his conversation with Hinata, he'd noticed that her room didn't seem to have a single card or decoration. While she'd only just been cleared for visitors, he knew her worthless family wouldn't be bothered to do anything to cheer her up.

He shook his head. No matter what his opinion was, he didn't need to be ranting about them to Hinata. She knew what he thought, and getting too angry would only upset her.

When he returned to the hospital, arriving through the visitor's entrance this time, Naruto marched straight to Hinata's room and knocked on the door. He didn't want to give the nurse that kicked him out yesterday time to come up with an excuse for why he couldn't see his friend. He could feel a couple of glares aimed in his direction, but just ignored them. If Hinata had to put up with all that crap from her family, what did he have to complain about?

"Yes? Come in." maybe it was his imagination, but her voice seemed to be a little stronger today. He shifted the flowers so he was holding them behind his back.

"Good morning, Hinata-chan!" Naruto announced brightly as he opened the door and walked in.

She was indeed looking less pale than the day before and she seemed to be moving a little easier as she sat up. Surely if her face was that pink, her circulation must be improving as well.

"N-Naruto-kun," she said, sounding surprised. That bothered Naruto, just a little bit.

With a flourish, Naruto pulled the flowers from behind his back and placed them on the table. "I thought this place could use a little color," he explained.

"They're b-beautiful," Hinata said in a choked voice.

"I'm glad you like them," Naruto replied as he walked over to the window and opened it. The clones standing on the wall outside climbed in with their burdens.

"Gai said that was a good book on Goken katas and combinations," Naruto explained. "And I got ramen for both of us this time. Kurenai-sensei still had your bag and I figured there was some stuff in there that you might want so she let me bring it."

It took a moment for Naruto to unpack the ramen. When he looked up, Hinata was staring at him, clutching her bag and with the book sitting in her lap. "What?" he asked.

Hinata shook her head for a moment. "Why are you doing all this?" she asked, an uncertain tone creeping into her voice like a thief in the night. Naruto hated that painful way she had of second-guessing herself. He vowed to do his best to kill it.

"I just wanted to have lunch with my best friend," he explained as he handed her a steaming bowl.

Author notes:

All right, you people begging for fluff, here's your fluff. With a bit of drama and character development thrown in to cut all the teeth-rotting sweetness.

I was actually originally intending to move the story a little farther along, but I was waylaid by Kurenai and Hinata who proceeded to curb-stomp me into compliance with their wishes. That whole nasty confrontation between teacher and student pretty much wrote itself. And it makes sense when you think about things. Hinata's determination in her match with Neji, while admirable, went beyond the appropriate for something that is really little more than an exhibition match to showcase the competitors' skills.

Or to quote Al Yackey from *Always:* "You see, Pete, there is no war here. This is why they don't make movies called *Night Raid in Boise, Idaho* , or *Firemen Strike at Dawn* . And this is why you're not exactly a hero for taking the chances you take. You're more of what I would call—a dickhead."

Yes, Naruto is being especially considerate, circumspect, and perceptive in this chapter. He's had some nasty things thrown in his face this chapter and all the things Kurenai has been doing to get him to think through things is finally starting to pay off.

Considering Sasuke's defeat last chapter: Going by canon facts, there is no way Sasuke could win that fight. Lee cleaned his clock in canon before the first exam, though that never occurred in this timeline. Naruto and Lee have trained and pushed each other for months and Naruto has enough speed to keep up with a Lee that has trained even harder than he did in canon. Also, Sasuke just had his curse seal dealt with - and in canon that left him so weak that Yoroi nearly beat him. Finally, Sasuke has only seen Naruto fight once since the Academy, and his attention was focused on Orochimaru at the time... so based on past experience, he was horribly overconfident. Naruto also had a nap and a meal before the second exam ended. That all adds up to a very one-sided fight. Any one of those three factors could spell defeat... all of them? Ouch!

Final Note: Bibliophile suggested he'd like to see the scene with Iruka cleaning out the assembled Jonin by betting on Naruto in the preliminary match. I think I'll open this up as another Omake Contest. See my blog for the details!

# Mortal Combat

Chapter 16

Chapter 16

On his way to the hospital, Naruto cursed sulphurously when a clone's memories suddenly surged into his mind. The clone had been cutting through the hot springs carrying a bag of carryout from the dango shop when it was dispersed. Hinata had hesitantly asked if they could try something besides ramen the previous day, causing Naruto to smack himself on the forehead. He tended to get into a routine with his improvised lunch arrangements and forgot that not everyone was as crazy as he was about his favorite food.

Of course, Hinata immediately thought he was upset at her instead of himself.

Naruto shook his head. It had taken the rest of his afternoon visit to convince her that he wasn't angry with her. This was complicated by a growing sense of rage he felt toward her so-called family. Now that he had a rough idea of what life was like in the Hyuuga Clan, it was easier for him to see how it had twisted his friend.

Now he was doubly angry. His clone had seen a white-haired old man crouched down in front of the fence that screened the women's bathing area. The creepy old pervert was emitting a high-pitched giggle that made Naruto's skin crawl, even in memory. Disgusted, the clone demanded to know what he was doing there.

No sooner had the words left the ersatz Naruto's mouth than there was a loud pop and the old pervert was now facing him, sitting on top of a massive orange toad. The toad's mouth cracked open and an enormously long tongue shot out and wrapped itself around the clone's waist.

"You keeping making so much noise, you're going to get me caught," the white-haired old man said in a dismissive tone. There was a glimpse of a horned forehead protector holding back the white mane. Ninja? Wearing wooden geta on his feet? "Why don't you cool off?" the strange shinobi asked and the disgustingly slimy tongue flexed and whipped the clone off its feet and into the aqueduct that fed into the bath house.

Unfortunately, the impact with the water was hard enough to disperse the clone. Its last memory was flinging the bag of dango away from the canal.

Naruto scowled and immediately summoned ten more clones. Without a word, they took off for the hot springs to reclaim the dango… and keep an eye out for a white-haired older man in olive robes and a red over-jacket.

When he was still two blocks from the hospital, his mood became even more disgusted. His clones didn't find anything near the hot springs, aside from a lot of angry looking women. Of course, one of them assumed the green-clad boys were there to peep as well, and they'd been attacked and dispersed before they could ask a single question.

Naruto saw a bakery right across the street from where he was standing, but he knew the owners hated him on sight. Even if they deigned to serve him, he didn't want Hinata eating anything they knew was being sold to 'the demon boy'. He sighed and ducked into an alley. One quick henge later, he looked like a blond version of Kiba, without the facial tattoos. He strode out of the alley and crossed the street toward the bakery. Ordinarily, he wouldn't want to support their stupid business in any way, but this was for Hinata.

---

Naruto was just leaving the hospital when one of the chuunin that assisted the Hokage caught up to him.

"Naruto-san, the Hokage would like to see you as soon as possible," the young man said in an oddly respectful tone.

Naruto frowned. It was almost time for his next session with Gai-sensei. Well, there wasn't anything he could do about it. He created another clone and instructed it to find Gai-sensei and tell him Naruto had been summoned to the Hokage's office.

Naruto turned back to the chuunin, who looked slightly disconcerted, and simply said "Let's go."

The chuunin set a brisk pace, but Naruto wished they could get there sooner. He had no idea what jii-san wanted, but the way this day had gone so far, it probably wasn't good.

At least Hinata had liked the sweet bean buns.

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Sakura stared after Naruto and the chuunin as they hurried down the street. Ino had to elbow her twice to get her attention, which almost sparked an argument. The word "Ino-pig" was about to leave her lips when she caught herself. Rebuilding a relationship with her former best friend was more work than she'd imagined. It was a little disturbing how ingrained some of her more… aggressive… reactions had become. It was one thing to realize that you weren't a very nice person, but doing something about it was quite another.

Instead, she made an effort to smile at her old friend. Ino returned it, a little tentatively. "Was that Naruto?" the blond asked.

Sakura nodded. "I think so," she answered. Ino frowned. She seemed a little ambivalent where their former classmate was concerned. Not that Sakura had much room to talk.

Things had been simpler at the Academy. Uzumaki Naruto was the class clown and an incessant prankster. He was really irritating, but it was also… reassuring… in a way. You could always predict what

he'd do in a given situation. It was always "ramen" this or "Hokage" that. He was… safe.

Sakura had seen another side of him during the exams. His advice to Lee was something that still stung in her memory, mostly because it was true. Then the terrifying fight against that Grass ninja, when Naruto's team jumped in without hesitation. Even worse was the attack by the Sound genin team, and the terrifying auras enveloping Naruto and Sasuke when they woke up.

However, the biggest shock of all was during the preliminary matches. She'd wanted to cringe when Sasuke had brought up Hinata's defeat. Even if it was a valid tactic, it dishonored someone that had fought to defend him when he was unconscious. But she hadn't even had time to make a face before Naruto had decisively ended the match. Where was the class clown now?

Sasuke refused to talk about the match, even after the bandage was removed from his jaw. But when a disappointed-looking Kakashi-sensei announced they were starting extra training sessions, Sasuke threw himself into the lessons with a disturbing intensity.

"I heard he goes to visit her every day," Ino said in a faint voice.

"Who?" Sakura asked, jolted out of her reverie.

"One of the ladies visiting the shop complained that she's seen him at the hospital every day this week," Ino clarified. "He must be visiting Hinata."

That was rather… nice, Sakura concluded. She wondered if Sasuke would visit her in the hospital if she had been injured. She shook her head after a moment's thought. No. No, he wouldn't. Not if he had the option of training.

Sakura made an effort to change the subject and turned to Ino, asking her if Chouji or Shikamaru were nervous about their upcoming matches.

Listening to her old friend rant about her teammates was a balm to uneasy nerves. It was good to have her back.

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Yuuhi Kurenai had just finished summarizing her notes when the messenger from the Hokage arrived. She took the message from the young chuunin with a nod and opened it. It was a polite request for her to report to the Hokage's tower at her earliest convenience. On an impulse, she decided to take her notes with her. She had little doubt the Hidden Sand jinchuuriki would come up in their discussion and she might need to reference the reports she'd gathered. She knew the Sand jinchuuriki had been under close surveillance since she'd made her original report, but he or his jonin-sensei must have sensed the watchers. They'd done nothing suspicious, but they were still shinobi – the lack of suspicious activity was itself cause for concern.

Kurenai stretched her shoulders and twisted her back to loosen it up as she began walking to the center of the village. She'd been at this for days, but the safety of Naruto and Shino demanded no less.

It was unfortunate that she'd been forced to miss watching Gaara's fight with Rock Lee. From Maito Gai's description of the match, the Suna Genin had incredibly formidable defenses, even though he'd been unable to match Lee's speed for most of the battle. More disturbing were reports from Mitarashi Anko concerning the crushed bodies she'd discovered in the aptly-named Forest of Death. The cause of death was catastrophic blunt trauma, though the masses of sand filling the crushed victims' noses and throats would have killed them almost as quickly. Only remnants of the sand remained, but the ruptures and distention of the oral and nasal cavities suggested they had once been packed full of sand. All the evidence suggested this was the handiwork of Sabaku no Gaara.

The fact that the genin was a killer was not lost on Kurenai. While a few deaths were considered unavoidable in the constant skirmishing during the second exam, the fact remained that this Gaara person seemed to have no compunctions regarding the taking of human life.

Moreover, given the defenses Gai described, it was more than likely that Gaara's victims had no way of even hurting the Sand genin. The overall psychological profile she'd managed to develop was just as grim.

The political implications of the Kazekage entering such a dangerous predator into Konoha's chuunin exam were just as ugly. However, that was the Hokage's job to evaluate. Hers was to get him the most accurate information possible.

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Kurenai had just gone over her data on Gaara when Naruto arrived.

"Hokage-sama, Sensei," Naruto greeted them with a polite bow, before quietly sitting in the other chair. Kurenai raised an eyebrow, wondering if she was being set up for another prank. Then she noticed out of the corner of her eye the old man's expression of stark disbelief. Maybe the joke wasn't on her this time.

"Ah, Naruto," the Hokage said after a moment. "I read your sensei's report regarding the events that occurred during the second exam. You said that you actually… spoke to it?"

Naruto nodded soberly, and Kurenai was inwardly pleased that he was taking this seriously. "It didn't like the idea of someone placing *another* seal on me. He said it could have effects on my mind, and he didn't want his vessel being controlled by someone else. Also, the seal's chakra was interfering with both my chakra and the fox's chakra." Naruto paused, scratching his head. "He was really a jerk about it, but I think he was actually worried."

The Sandaime puffed on his pipe while he digested this. Kurenai was a little disconcerted at the idea of the Kyuubi being worried about anything. It was like hearing about a typhoon with hurt feelings. "And you were able to remove Orochimaru's seal by forcing your chakra into it?"

Naruto nodded. "Mine, but mostly the fox's chakra. It hurt, right up until the stupid thing exploded," her student explained, unconsciously clutching his right forearm. "It's sort of like when you get a really infected pimple, so you squeeze the skin around it until it pops. It hurts the worst right before it explodes all over-"

"Yes, thank you Naruto!" Kurenai said quickly. She'd had her share of blemishes when she was younger, and had no desire to be reminded of all the gory details. No matter how apt a metaphor it might be.

She glanced quickly toward the Hokage, but the old man was merely nodding thoughtfully. "As the seal has worked constantly since you were a baby, the steady flow of chakra no doubt enlarged your coils, reinforcing them. That's why the pressure didn't rupture them." He nodded. "Naruto, since then, have you noticed any changes with respect to the seal or… your prisoner?"

Naruto shrugged, looking a little uncomfortable. "Not really. Sometimes I feel the red chakra a little easier when I'm mad at something, but I think that started before the Chuunin Exam."

The Hokage nodded gravely. "That doesn't sound too bad, Naruto, provided you keep your temper under control. I know you didn't ask for this responsibility, but you need to make sure there are not any… accidents."

Kurenai knew the Hokage was definitely hinting about the upcoming finals, but hoped he didn't press the point. Hyuuga Neji's behavior during his match with Hinata was just short of criminal, and her student's desire to return the favor was not something she disagreed with. On the other hand, if Naruto did get out of hand… some might seek to use that. Still, better to not belabor the point, or else Naruto might think they were more interested in protecting the Hyuuga prodigy.

Fortunately, the Hokage was satisfied with Naruto's quick nod. "I've also asked a former student of mine to return to Konoha. With all the people looking for him, I actually expected him before now.

Apparently he was delayed. In any event, Jiraiya is an expert on seals, and he helped the Fourth develop some of the techniques that went into the seal placed on you, Naruto. He is probably the person most qualified to make sure the seal hasn't been damaged in any way." Kurenai's eyebrows lifted when she realized who the Hokage was referring to.

There was a knock at the door, and one of the chuunin guards stuck his head inside. "Jiraiya-sama is here, Hokage-sama," he said in a quietly reverent tone. From what little Kurenai had heard about the Hokage's legendary students, known throughout the land as the Sannin, it was more than merited.

After a nod from the Hokage, the door opened all the way and a tall, broad-shouldered man strode into the room. He wore dull green robes over a mesh shirt that she could see glimpses of at the neck and wrists. On top of everything else he wore an oversized red vest with a yellow circle over each breast. Archaic wooden geta clacked on the floor, but his stride exhibited the steadiness that spoke of long experience wearing them.

The white hair suggested age, but his face was for the most part unlined. Kurenai estimated him to be in his fifties – a most dangerous age for shinobi. Without the energy of youth, some shinobi were content to slow down at that age, to take things easier. The more serious ones refused to concede anything to the passage of years, possibly even intensifying their training regimen. While maybe not as resilient as they once were, they stayed every bit as strong, and their accumulated experience made them far deadlier. Yuuhi Kurenai did not need to guess into which category this man had fallen. She almost unconsciously straightened her spine. This was obviously a man worthy of respect.

The fact that he was casually munching on a stick of dango only reinforced this impression. Not many would be comfortable acting so casual in the Hokage's office. Though she understood that Naruto was an exception to that rule…

As if on cue, she heard her genin erupt in sputters of outrage.

"You no-good bastard *thief!* " Naruto shouted, jumping up from his chair.

"Naruto!" Kurenai snapped, too shocked at his reaction to do much more than gape.

"He's still eating the evidence!" Naruto snarled, pointing a finger in the man's face as he consumed the last of the sweet treat. "I bought that for Hinata-chan!" he added angrily, as if that made it even more contemptible. Kurenai frowned.

Jiriaiya cocked his head and peered at Kurenai through hooded eyes. "Isn't he a little young for a girlfriend?" he asked.

Naruto's shout of protest was ignored with a wave of the Sannin's hand. "I just kept it from going to waste," Jiraiya replied casually, picking at his teeth with the dango stick. "Your clone shouldn't have been so rude. Are you normally too lazy to run your own errands?" he asked curiously.

Naruto was red in the face, fists clenched, and emitting more than a small amount of killing intent. Kurenai was about to say something when she watched him visibly gather himself, opening his fists and closing his eyes until his complexion was back to normal. When he opened his eyes again, their normal blue tint seemed more like winter ice than summer skies.

"My clone just wanted to know why you were peeping into the women's baths," Naruto replied in an icy tone.

Kurenai spun toward Jiraiya, vaguely aware that there was now a kunai in her hand. "Is this true?" she asked in a deceptively mild voice. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the Hokage massaging his forehead with a pained expression.

"Of course not!" Jiraiya blustered. "I was doing research!"

"Research on what?" Kurenai asked calmly.

"Er, spying techniques. That's part of my cover, you know. No one takes a drunken old lecher seriously, so I can gather a lot of information with no one noticing." By the end of his explanation, he was clearly on a roll, chest puffed out and chin up. "I'm willing to make any sacrifice necessary to serve Konoha, for I am Myouboku Mountain's Monk of the Toad Spirits, also known as the Toad Hermit!" With that he struck a dramatic pose that made Kurenai roll her eyes. This was the Hokage's expert?

"Jiraiya has sent back quite a bit of information," the Hokage said in a strained voice. It didn't escape Kurenai's attention that he hadn't commented on the rest of his former student's claims. "I expected you at least a week ago," the Hokage continued, directing his attention toward Jiraiya now. "What delayed you?"

"Well," Jiraiya began, grimacing as he stretched his neck until it cracked, "someone had the *brilliant* idea to send this kid out to the border with Earth Country. I heard a few rumors as I was coming back and decided to chase them down. A renegade faction in Iwakagure was putting out word they wanted to hire missing-nins for an assassination within Konoha. Normally, that would require a bank full of ryou, but since the target was only a genin, some of the more desperate mercenaries were getting interested."

The Hokage scowled fiercely. "This is getting completely out of hand," he said, "has something been done about them?"

Jiraiya nodded smugly. "I had a few words with some contacts I maintain in the Tsuchikage's office, and they leaked the information to the right people. Iwagakure doesn't want a war with Konoha, at least not this year."

Almost in spite of herself, Kurenai felt a bit of gratitude toward the Sannin. The last thing Naruto needed right now was more people that wanted him dead.

"That's good, as long as no hint of your involvement gets out," the Hokage said in a worried tone. "How reliable are these contacts of yours?"

"Very," Jiraiya answered, "they know I'm using them to some extent, but exposing this faction furthered their own interests as well. Besides, they are big fans of my work."

"Ah," the Hokage replied in a careful tone. "That's useful, I suppose."

"Fans?" Kurenai asked curiously as she slid the kunai back into its concealed sheath.

"Of my great literary works," Jiraiya responded in a grandiose manner.

"Hmph," Naruto grunted. "If it was written by you, it's probably a dirty book."

"Naruto!" Kurenai snapped. Disreputable or not, this Jiraiya had done them no small service. It wouldn't be prudent to alienate him.

On the other hand, as Jiraiya began to harangue Naruto about respecting his elders, Kurenai did notice an odd expression flicker across the Hokage's face. It was an odd mixture of guilt and amusement. "My apologies, Jiraiya-sama," she said in a formal tone. "My student is, as you can see, still upset. I am, however, fairly well read and I am curious to see if I may have read one of your books. What are their titles?"

"I'm about to publish Icha-Icha Paradise, volume seven!" Jiraiya announced proudly, ignoring the frantic waving of the Hokage's hands.

"The books with the… orange covers?" Kurenai asked, slipping the kunai back into her hand as the Hokage covered his eyes.

"Why yes," Jiraiya answered slyly. "I can get you an advance copy, if you like."

"Naruto," Kurenai said through slightly clenched teeth. "Would you mind waiting in the hallway for a moment?"

"No, Sensei," Naruto said quickly and scuttled out of the room. A distant portion of her mind wondered why he had gone so pale. Maybe he was even more disgusted than she was.

"Good idea," Jiraiya said with a leer that turned her stomach. "Some things shouldn't be discussed around brats, at least not until they are older."

Kurenai turned to glare at the older man. Sannin or not, she'd wondered about the source of Kakashi's disgusting books for a while now. "I'm not sure what conversational topics *you* are referring to, but there are things I do not want a boy of that age exposed to. Among them is my opinion of the garbage you write."

Jiraiya's mouth dropped open. He turned shocked eyes toward the Hokage, but out of the corner of her eye, Kurenai saw the old man looking down as he fiddled with his pipe.

"It's bad enough to even have those thoughts, to treat women as mere sex objects, but to publish them so others can revel in your perversity? Do you know how many times I've had to sit through jonin meetings and listen to Hatake Kakashi, an otherwise skilled shinobi of the Leaf, reading one of your books and *giggling* like an adolescent schoolgirl? Half of the people I deal with don't take me seriously as a jonin because of the sexist ideas that *infest* our society, and here you are spreading the infection."

Kurenai took a deep breath. This was an issue that had annoyed her for as long as she could remember, but this immature idiot was still a high ranking shinobi who could help her student. Stabbing him, while highly satisfying, would not be prudent. "Uzumaki Naruto," she said in a cold voice, "has put up with a lot of crap in his life, little of it

deserved. This village hates him for incredibly stupid reasons, yet he has persevered and exceeded even my expectations. If you do anything to damage that, or corrupt him in any way, you *will* answer to me, and, Sannin or not, I *will* find a way to make you pay. Is that understood?"

Jiraiya's face went stony during her tirade, and Kurenai braced herself for an explosion of wounded male pride. Instead, he just cocked his head and cracked a lop-sided grin. "Little brat really got to you, didn't he?" he asked.

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Things were a little calmer when Naruto was summoned back into the Hokage's office. While it was a relief to feel the tension was mostly gone, he was a little disappointed to find the old pervert unharmed.

He didn't even want to *think* of what Kurenai-sensei would do to *him* if she caught him peeking into the women's baths. He wasn't even sure she had realized that she was holding a kunai in her hand, but the fact that the hand in question had been at waist level had made quite an impression on him.

He was slightly self-conscious when the toad hermit told him to take off his jacket and t-shirt. If Kurenai-sensei and Hokage-sama weren't there, he might even have bolted. Who knew what kind of sick stuff the old pervert might be into?

It didn't help that this Jiraiya guy couldn't keep from making comments once he was naked from the waist up.

"Damn, don't they feed kids here anymore?" he asked with a smirk.

"It might help if he ate something besides ramen," Kurenai observed coolly. Naruto knew she was probably still irritated at this Jiraiya person, but now she was taking it out on him. Naruto's irritation spiked even higher when Jiraiya reached out and squeezed his bicep.

"Wiry, but he's still got some good muscle tone," the old man said speculatively.

"In addition to his normal missions and team training, he's been working with a taijutsu specialist," Kurenai observed. "Very few shinobi train as hard as he does." Naruto willed his cheeks not to redden. It still felt good to hear his sensei acknowledge all his hard work.

"That's good," Jiraiya replied with a nod. "But taijutsu is only part of being a shinobi."

"Taijutsu was an area that had been especially neglected by his instructors at the Academy," Kurenai shot back. "Improving that also improves the performance of his clones, which he is highly skilled with. I've also introduced them to basic jutsu of different types. However, given his situation, Naruto has experienced some unique challenges with respect to ninjutsu."

Naruto frowned. "Neh, sensei, I haven't blown up a tree in ages!" It wouldn't hurt to remind them that he was right here after all.

"Nonetheless, you almost did yourself serious injury with a very basic technique," Kurenai replied.

"Oh, I've *got* to hear this," Jiraiya said with a grin.

Naruto scowled as Kurenai explained his little mishap with the raiton jutsu. While she didn't go out of her way to make him sound stupid, the smiles and chuckles from Jiraiya *and* the Hokage were getting on his nerves.

But the old creep looked thoughtful when she explained how Naruto had to consciously withhold chakra to keep from overloading his jutsu. "Things may be farther along than I anticipated. Okay, brat, I want you to mold some chakra. Don't do anything with it, just mold it."

Naruto did as he was told, but he almost lost his focus when Jiraiya leaned forward to stare at his stomach. Naruto looked down and saw the elaborate eight-lobed seal had become visible around his navel.

"Keep it steady," Jiraiya ordered as his eyes narrowed.

After a while, the old pervert straightened up and told Naruto he could relax. "It looks like everything is intact. None of the elements appear to be breaking down, but it's advanced a little farther than I expected."

"Advanced?" Kurenai asked quickly.

"The seal was designed to let the Kyuubi's chakra leak out and slowly mix with Naruto's," Jiraiya explained. "Done gradually enough, this would allow his body to adjust and absorb the chakra into his own reserves. As he grew, the constant pressure enlarged his coils, even as they were reinforced to handle the extra load. Now from what I can see, these passages were designed to slowly expand as Naruto aged, to increase the rate at which he can access this chakra. Otherwise, the Kyuubi could have flooded him too quickly when he was younger, and either damaged his coils or tried to influence him."

Naruto gulped.

"The passages are dilated more than I expected to see at his age. On the other hand, from what I can see his coils are also better developed, so it's still under control. You'd need to get a Hyuuga or someone to seriously check out his coils, but I think the seal is adapting to Naruto's own development," the old man said with a grin. "That has to be my student's finest work," he added, the pride in his voice unmistakable.

" *You* taught the Fourth?" Naruto demanded. The Fourth Hokage, savior of Konoha, was taught by a pervert?

"I'll have Hinata do an evaluation when she's released from the hospital," Kurenai said, her expression unreadable.

"She's a Hyuuga?" Jiraiya asked. Then he winked at Naruto. "Not bad, kid."

"She's not my girlfriend," Naruto said quickly, remembering Jiraiya's earlier remark. "She's my teammate."

The Hokage cleared his throat. "Well, it's good to hear that we don't have anything to worry about," he said. "And it looks like Naruto will continue to grow stronger if he keeps this up. Though he may always have some issues with respect to having too much chakra."

Naruto shrugged, but an idea had taken root in the back of his mind. Time for some payback. "I think I already know all the jutsu I need. Taijutsu is much more useful anyway."

That earned him a sharp look from Kurenai, but the old hermit simply exploded. "Is that what you think, you little brat? I can show you things that will make your hair stand on end, permanently!"

"I think that's an excellent idea," the Hokage said quickly. "Given his reserves, Naruto could use some assistance learning more advanced jutsu than is normally taught to genin."

Jiraiya's eyes bulged in their sockets. "Hey! He already has a sensei!" he objected.

"Kurenai is a genjutsu specialist, an area in which I understand that Naruto's attributes mean he is especially challenged." The Hokage replied, lighting his pipe again.

"It requires a certain delicacy to the chakra manipulations, and his control is still not up to that level," Kurenai explained with an apologetic look toward Naruto. "He is, however, amazingly talented as dispelling genjutsu."

"Not to mention that Kurenai also has a third genin that Naruto could possibly fight in the finals," the Hokage added. "It would be somewhat awkward, if she were to spend significantly more time with one student than the other."

Naruto could smell a con job a mile away. "Don't worry about it," he said dismissively. "I'd rather spend more time with Gai-sensei if he'll let me. He's a really good teacher and I know I'll learn more useful things than I could with this pervert."

Jiraiya rounded on Naruto, his face the picture of outrage. "Is that what you think?" he demanded. "Put your clothes back on and follow me."

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After Naruto followed Jiraiya out of the office, Kurenai turned to the Hokage. "That was very neat," she observed.

The old man chuckled. "Sannin or not, I've known him since he was a boy. Naruto did most of the work though. You've really done wonders with him."

Kurenai allowed herself a slight smile. "I can't take too much credit. He's always been exceedingly clever." But then she thought of Hinata and the smile bled off of her face. "I think he's going to need it though."

"Is there something you'd like to report?" the Hokage asked in a delicate tone.

"Officially?" Kurenai replied. "No. Unofficially, I think Naruto has had some things confirmed that I've been suspecting. It will be… challenging for him to deal with this knowledge, since the wrongdoer is far too politically connected to answer for his crimes. But that's just the way things are, isn't it? Better he learn that sooner than later." Her bitterness was unmistakable.

She felt a flash of guilt when the Hokage winced. "I can still open an inquiry," he offered, "but-"

"But with no new evidence, the outcome will be useless," Kurenai admitted. "Worse, some will see this as politically motivated and use that against you."

"And if they discover that you were the instigator of the investigation…" the Hokage added, letting his voice trail off.

Kurenai frowned. "Yes, that would be enough justification to demand she be transferred to another jonin. I think he'd do that just to spite both of us."

"If you can think of another way to address this, please let me know," Sarutobi added before taking a thoughtful puff on his pipe.

"I don't think there is," Kurenai said in a pained voice. "And that's the lesson Naruto has to learn from all this. But I don't think it's one he will accept."

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By the time they quit later that evening, Naruto had to admit the old pervert knew his jutsu. He proved this by ordering Naruto to show him a technique he knew, and then had him stand back.

After Naruto demonstrated Doton: Wana, causing a training log to sink a couple of feet into the ground, the toad hermit made a series of seals and exclaimed "Doton: Yomi Numa!" Instantly, the ground fell away in front of the toad hermit, the hole filling with water. The so-called "Swamp of the Underworld" engulfed half the training ground, undermining trees, submerging equipment, and generally creating havoc.

Naruto found himself drooling. He'd never seen anything so… beautiful. He imagined using that on an unwary pursuit team chasing his friends and shivered.

"What were the seals for that one again?" he asked in a reverent tone.

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In the end, they worked out a compromised schedule. Naruto continued working with Gai and Lee in the morning, had lunch with Hinata-chan at the hospital while she was still being treated, and then spent the afternoons and early evenings with the toad hermit.

Jiraiya preferred that division, since he said he 'wasn't a morning person'. Since Naruto always saw him heading off toward Konoha's red lantern district after their training sessions, he had a pretty good idea of why.

Naruto was a little hesitant to tell Gai-sensei that he wouldn't be working with them in the afternoons anymore, but the minute Jiraiya's name left his mouth, Gai was *most* enthusiastic about the change. Naruto could only assume Gai knew the toad hermit, or at least of his reputation, which made Naruto begin to wonder about the old man. Maybe he wasn't as flaky as he acted, sort of like Gai-sensei at the hospital.

In any event, he made the most of this more limited training time, fighting Rock Lee head on, rather than trying to always outlast him. It was mostly pretty painful, but he did cherish the few times he managed to knock his friend on his butt.

A couple of days into this new routine, Kurenai invited him and Shino over for dinner at her house. Naruto arrived at the small homestead, somewhat curious as to her purpose. He hoped it wasn't to talk about Hinata – the things she'd told him were said in confidence, and it wouldn't feel right to repeat them, even to Shino and Kurenai.

Shino was just walking up to the front door when Naruto arrived. Superficially, the Aburame genin looked the same as always. However, Gai had been coaching him and Lee on how to evaluate an opponent's body language. Shino's stride seemed tighter, more controlled, and his center of gravity never deviated as he walked.

Naruto didn't doubt that Shino's mother had really been working on his weapon skills.

Shino acknowledged Naruto's wave with a barely perceptible nod before Naruto knocked on the door.

Their sensei opened the door and showed them into her home. Naruto muttered the traditional pleasantries that Hinata had drilled him on as they walked to the Aburame household, but Kurenai merely waved them off. He looked around curiously. The house was… comfortable… he supposed was the best word to describe it. The furniture was simple, but well-maintained, and everything was arranged in an orderly fashion. There were a few pictures on the walls, mostly of an older couple he guessed were her parents. The only picture of his sensei was in a faded group shot that he guessed was her old team, along with a burly man who had to be Kobaru-sensei.

Kurenai showed him and Shino into the dining room and gestured for them to sit down. Naruto was surprised to see the table piled with papers and scrolls. A few cardboard containers were piled haphazardly on a side table, but they did smell good.

"I picked up some take-out dinners from Moritake's," Kurenai explained as she passed them each a box and sat down. "I figured we could eat while I go over my findings."

Naruto carefully set aside his dinner and curiously opened the top folder on the pile in front of him. Inside was a stack of papers, topped with a picture of Hyuuga Neji.

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"…and that pretty much sums up all the competitors in the Chuunin Examination finals, with two exceptions," Kurenai said as she concluded her presentation.

"Naruto and myself," Shino replied.

"Yes," Kurenai agreed. She was pleasantly surprised at how attentive her audience was. There was something to be said for mortal peril with respect to sharpening one's focus. "I assume the two of you know each other fairly well, so that would be wasted effort. Furthermore, these reports contain a fair amount of speculation and guesswork on my part, based on the available data."

"And you do not wish to inadvertently compromise anything either of us has told you in confidence," Shino added. Naruto nodded. No doubt his recent conversations with Hinata had made him especially sensitive to such concerns.

"That is correct," Kurenai confirmed.

Naruto shrugged. "I won't do anything to kill your bugs, Shino."

"It would be inappropriate for me to expect you to hold back, Naruto," Shino replied, straightening his dark glasses.

Naruto grinned. "You told me they can't really drain my chakra too well. They keep getting full and falling off."

"I can utilize them to consume flesh as well as chakra," Shino informed him. "The former, however is not usually necessary, and the utilization of anthropophagous techniques against nominal allies is contraindicated for a rank progression match."

Naruto made a face. "Are you *trying* to get the tent to yourself, next time we go camping?"

Kurenai cleared her throat very loudly. "I want both of you to do you best," she told them, "but I also do not want to see either of you inflicting permanent injuries on each other. Is that understood?"

Naruto nodded. "I'm saving all that for Neji," he declared with a wide grin.

Shino adjusted his glasses again. The repeated gesture betrayed his agitation to anyone who knew him well. Kurenai wondered if she should ask him how he felt about the match-ups for the final. He wasn't visibly distressed that Naruto would get to fight Neji first, but sometimes she wondered. After a moment, Shino spoke again, "If I am over-matched in one of my fights, I will endeavor to drain as much of their chakra before I am defeated. This should help you if you face them afterward."

Naruto scratched his head. "Thanks," he said after a moment. "If I, er, get into the same situation, I'll try to hit their legs if I can and slow them down for your bugs to catch."

Kurenai sighed. "I suppose no one can blame you two for that," she said. Then she began gathering up the notes she'd gone through. "Both of you take your copies home with you. I'd be very careful about letting anyone else see them, but you should make a point of memorizing all the pertinent details."

Shino had already organized his reports neatly into the file, but Naruto had let his papers spread out. He hurriedly began shuffling the papers back together. "Ah, sensei," he said after a moment as he got them all together, "I almost forgot I needed to ask you something."

"What is it Naruto?" Kurenai asked as she stood up and stretched. After little rest the last few nights, she would have no trouble sleeping tonight.

"The old pervert was showing me some new moves, and something called summoning technique," Naruto explained. "He said I could learn it, but first I had to sign a special contract." He shrugged. "You said I should be careful about signing any sort of contract and to talk to you before I did."

Kurenai nodded, even as she sighed. Technically, it would be advantageous for him not to bring this up in front of Shino, but he apparently wasn't capable of regarding his teammates as potential

enemies. "I've heard of summoning contracts before," she admitted. "I understand they can be useful, but are very chakra-intensive. That's why they aren't really covered at the Academy. Normally only a jonin can use one effectively. Also, this is something you might want to think over. Normally, I understand that these contracts usually contain an exclusivity clause that would prevent you from signing a contract with a different type of animal in the future."

Naruto frowned and looked thoughtful.

"I presume that Jiraiya has the contract for toads?" Kurenai asked.

Naruto nodded, and they both jumped as Shino dropped his folder on the floor. Shino quickly bent over and began gathering his papers, shoving them haphazardly into the folder. When he straightened up, Kurenai thought she noticed a slight tremor in his hands. "Are you all right?" she asked.

Shino nodded. Then he turned to Naruto. "That would be a very formidable technique. That being the case, I will no doubt be forced to forfeit the match if we meet in the finals."

"Forfeit?" Naruto asked, clearly dismayed. "But why?"

"Toads are incredibly voracious insectivores," Shino explained, "capable of consuming a significant portion of their own body mass in a single night. If I attempted to use my kikai jutsu around them, I would stand to lose significant portions of my colonies in short order. Even if I were to defeat you, I would be effectively crippled in the process."

"Oh," Naruto said.

"However, you should not let that be your sole decision criterion," Shino concluded. "As this should remain between you and Kurenai-sensei, I will bid you both good evening."

With that, Shino left, and Kurenai wondered if it was her imagination or he was walking a little faster than usual. She shook her head and turned back to Naruto. "If you'd like some more information, I'll see what I can find at the library."

Naruto shook his head. "No way am I signing that scroll now," he declared.

Kurenai merely raised an eyebrow and awaited his explanation.

"The old pervert was showing off when he demonstrated the technique," Naruto began. "Some of those toads are *really* big. I wouldn't dare try using them when we're on a mission – one of them might eat Shino, just to get all his bugs."

Kurenai blinked. "I see," she said. That was definitely a novel reason not to learn a new jutsu. She only hoped Naruto didn't later regret his thoughtfulness.

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The day of the Chuunin Examination Final Matches dawned bright and sunny. Naruto stood in a line with the other competitors as the Hokage made a speech from the Kage's elevated platform welcoming all the spectators.

Things had gone well the last couple of weeks. Though disappointed about the contract, Jiraiya had still shown him some cool jutsu. Gai and Lee had his taijutsu at a level he'd barely imagined being capable of.

Best of all, Hinata wasn't in the damn hospital anymore.

After three weeks of convalescence, she was released with a long list of exercises she needed to perform. Though the rupture was healed, these exercises were vital to ensure the pulmonary tissues healed without excessive scarring or loss of elasticity.

More importantly, since the injury was sustained in the course of her normal duties, Kurenai-sensei directed Hinata to stay at her home until she'd fully recovered. This allowed the jonin to supervise Hinata's rehabilitation and make sure she was fully recovered before returning to active duty. At least, that was the official explanation.

Naruto couldn't deny the palpable relief he felt when Hinata told him about Kurenai's offer, but the joy on his friend's face ignited a spark of anger as well. It wasn't right that she should feel this way, that she'd rather train forever and never see her family again.

Almost against his will, he felt his eyes cutting over toward Neji, standing beside him. The Hyuuga prodigy's face seemed almost inhumanly composed. Naruto knew he'd have to do something about that.

After the Hokage was finished, Hayate walked out in front of them, looking as sickly as ever. He coughed once before speaking. "All right, as most of you know, the rule for these matches is that there aren't really any rules. You fight until you are dead, knocked out, or surrender." Another cough. "But if I decide the match is over, it's over. Understood?" Naruto wondered if it was his imagination or Hayate's glare seemed to fix itself on Neji and Gaara more than the rest of them.

"Okay, the first match is Uzumaki Naruto and Hyuuga Neji," Hayate continued. "I want the rest of you to go back to the waiting area until your matches are called."

The other six genin slowly filed off the field. Most of them were expressionless, but Shino and Naruto managed to share a quick nod before the Aburame boy left. The unspoken message was clear to Naruto. *Kick Neji's ass.*

---

Umino Iruka made his way gingerly through the stands as the competitors were gathered on the field. He had no desire to trip and bump into some visiting dignitary. An international incident would not

look good on his next performance review at the Konoha Ninja Academy.

Normally, he would sit with the academy instructors or the other chuunin and jonin attending the finals. This year found him sitting in more rarefied areas, wearing a fine kimono purchased with some of his recent winnings. Sartorial finery wasn't really his thing, but it was necessary for him to fit in and get close to his targets.

It was odd to apply the things he taught to something that most definitely wasn't a mission.

Almost reflexively his fingers brushed across the heavy purse belted to his waist. He didn't normally carry this much money around and it made him a little nervous. Not only did it contain his winnings from the preliminary round, but Ichiraku Teuchi, Yuuhi Kurenai, and a couple of others had added their money to his. He'd even approached Maito Gai at the end of one of his training sessions. He made sure Naruto wasn't around before mentioning the betting, as he didn't want to put any more pressure on the boy, but he felt he owed Gai an opportunity to profit as well. Gai frowned, thinking for well over a minute, before he regretfully declined. While he appreciated the offer, it didn't feel right to be betting against one of his own students, no matter what had happened before. Iruka didn't press the issue, understanding the man's awkwardness. But that didn't stop Rock Lee from catching up with Iruka later that day and pressing on him a squirrel-shaped wallet stuffed with ryou.

Listening carefully, Iruka's sharp ears located the amused murmurs, the dismissive whispers that guided him to his targets. He glanced around as he took a seat, apparently chosen at random. The rich finery and ostentatiously displayed wealth indicated some were no doubt members of the village council. There were a few lined faces with white eyes that he assumed were Hyuuga elders. The two youngest-looking Hyuugas there were Hiashi and his daughter, Hanabi. The latter seemed to look right through Iruka, not recognizing him out of his uniform.

Perfect.

Smoothing down his kimono with a fussy gesture, Iruka said, in a highly accented voice. "Well, this match looks interesting. Would anyone care to place a wager or two on the outcome?"

---

Naruto turned to face his opponent, who gazed back with a slightly superior expression. "You look like you want to say something," Neji said in a cold voice.

Naruto leaned forward slightly and grinned. Kurenai-sensei told him once that his canine teeth were a little larger than normal, and displaying them to best effect could have an unsettling effect on others. "Only that I've been looking forward to this for a month," he snarled.

Neji didn't bat an eye. "Given our relative capacities, that is a foolish desire."

"Foolish or not," Naruto said, "I will defeat you." He tensed a little as Hayate said to start and he saw Neji's Byakugan activate.

"You may honestly believe you have a chance against me," Neji said. "But I will also see your face when you realize the truth of your situation."

"You're not the first person to think that," Naruto scoffed, "and I doubt you'll be the last. Wherever he is, your father must be very disappointed."

That last barb sailed right through Hyuuga Neji's icy composure. The veins around his eyes bulged so far Naruto wondered if they might pop. "For that, I will kill you," Neji snapped.

Naruto shrugged. "Hey, at least you have some memories of yours. And *I* don't take my grief out on someone who shares it. Fool." The

last word was pure Shino speaking, but Naruto couldn't quite get the same contemptuous tone his teammate could.

"Are you two here to fight or talk?" Hayate interrupted, sounding annoyed.

"My apologies, Hayate-san," Naruto said lightly. "I just wanted Neji-kun to understand exactly why I'm going to beat him like a drum." With that, he formed the familiar ram seal and cried out "Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!"

A dozen clones surrounded Neji and immediately began to charge at the Hyuuga. He spun and dodged, avoiding all the attacks and exploding clones left and right.

"His Jyuuken is pretty good, isn't it?" Naruto asked Hayate in a conversational tone.

Hayate just turned to stare at him.

Naruto frowned. Maybe he thought this was a distraction so he could cheat. Then Naruto remembered there were no rules anyway. He shrugged. "He's not as graceful as Hinata-chan, but his strikes have more power behind them." He sighed as the last of the clones was dispatched. "But Jyuuken isn't everything, is it?"

With that, Naruto sprang away from Hayate, hurling a brace of kunai. Neji dodged them with unerring precision, moving his body just enough to make them miss.

Neji responded with his own volley of kunai. Naruto dodged all but one of them.

That one he caught and threw back with a mocking smile.

Neji moved in, closing the distance. "At least you recognize your limitations," he said with a sneer. "Everyone is born with a certain degree of talent, and that does not change. Struggling against your

fate is futile. You do not have the ability to defeat me, so you do well to keep your distance."

"Is that what the Hyuuga genius thinks?" Naruto snarled as he charged.

---

Hinata let out a gasp as she saw Naruto abruptly switch tactics. Kurenai-sensei wasn't sure she was up to watching the finals, but Hinata insisted she was fine. To prove the point, she even performed the prescribed daily breathing exercises three times yesterday to show she was fit. The idea of not watching Naruto fight was… was simply unacceptable.

However, watching the match was… surprisingly difficult for her. Of course, she wanted Naruto to win, but she also didn't want to see Neji killed. So much had been taken from her cousin… it didn't seem right that he lose everything else. But she couldn't ask Naruto to hold back either. Not when she didn't think Neji would hesitate to hurt her teammate.

In a way, it was a relief when Naruto insisted she explain about the Hyuuga clan. Not only did it give her a warm glow when he insisted there was nothing wrong with her, but it also allowed her to explain about Neji and his resentment of the main family. He'd lost his father to protect her father. Showing anger toward her father simply wasn't safe, not with the seal on Neji's forehead, waiting to be activated. So she was the logical target for his rage.

Kurenai, fortunately, hadn't heard her outburst. Sensei's attention was solely focused on the match, which shamed Hinata a little. She knew Kurenai was too disciplined to let random thoughts distract her from things. That was an example she should work harder to meet.

---

"You are just as foolish as I thought," Neji said as he ducked under Naruto's kick and countered with a palm-strike loaded with chakra. "Or are you anxious to meet your fate?"

Naruto executed a spinning block he perfected sparring with Hinata. His left palm slammed into Neji's forearm, well behind the chakra spike, turning the strike aside. "There is no fate but what we make," he replied with a tight grin. Continuing the motion, Naruto spun completely around and his right heel only missed Neji's ribs because the Hyuuga genius leapt backward. "I learned that one sparring with Hinata," Naruto informed him with a grin.

"You haven't seen the true power of Jyuuken, sparring with that weakling," Neji sneered.

Naruto's fragile rein on his temper cracked with an audible snap.

"She's not a weakling, asshole!" Naruto screamed and charged. His fist grazed Neji's jaw right before a Jyuuken strike speared through his shoulder.

"Dammit," Naruto growled as he somersaulted backwards. Ignoring the burning agony in his shoulder, he straightened his back at the right moment to launch himself backwards into the air.

Neji's follow-up blow struck the uncaring ground, rather than Naruto's spine.

Naruto was done playing with this idiot. He hit the weight-release catches and arched his back. As his rotation slowed, Naruto abruptly bent at the waist, snapping his arms and legs together and launching the weights like missiles. The momentum they imparted sent his much-lighter body flying backward like it had been shot from a cannon. He stuck to the wall using chakra and looked down at the arena floor.

Only one of the chakra-enhanced masses struck the target, much to Naruto's disappointment. But that one was enough to send Neji rolling across the arena. The rest had cratered rather impressively into the ground, kicking up a cloud of dust that had Hayate coughing again.

Neji climbed to his feet, not looking as battered as Naruto might have hoped. Of course, if he wasn't pretty damn good, he never would have beaten Hinata-chan. "More tricks?" the Hyuuga called out angrily. "Is that what you learned from my cousin?" he sneered. "Useless tricks like this?"

Naruto jumped down to the arena floor. "If it was useless, then how did you get knocked on your ass?" he asked. He bounced lightly on the balls of his feet. He hadn't taken his weights off in a long time. It felt good. Really good. Time to up the ante. "Here's some more tricks," he called out as he threw a wide spread of kunai, each one with an explosive tag attached.

Neji's eyes of course picked up the tags. Dodging multiple explosions would be damn near impossible. Instead, he raised his arms to shoulder level and began to spin. As he turned, chakra began to stream from his body, expanding outward even as it made him turn faster and faster.

Neither Hinata nor Kurenai knew for sure if Neji could perform the Hakkeshou Kaiten, or Heavenly Spin technique, an all-around defense against attacks. But if he didn't know it already, there was a good chance Hiashi might have taught him in the month of preparation. If nothing else, it would make a strong impression on the rest of the village, Kurenai had reasoned in her notes.

*Looks like she was right,* Naruto thought as he summoned a horde of clones. He sent them against Neji in fours and fives. They exploded as soon as they touched the sphere of spinning chakra that surrounded him, but the noise and puffs of smoke were definitely a distraction.

Naruto kneeled at the back of the crowd, gathering his chakra. "Doton: Yomi Numa!" he called out as he slapped his palm against the ground. He must have been a little over-excited, Naruto guessed, because the ground crumbled away even faster than he expected.

Most of the remaining clones charged forward as their footing disappeared. The pops as they exploded were almost deafening, but they served their purpose. Naruto watched with growing satisfaction as the Kaiten began to sink into the softening ground, slowly at first and then faster and faster as the Heavenly Spin sent mud flying in every direction and Hyuuga Neji's technique screwed himself into the ground.

By the time Neji realized what was happening and stopped, he was already ten feet down. Worse, no longer supported by his chakra emissions, the walls of liquefied mud that surrounded him collapsed. He was abruptly engulfed.

Naruto couldn't help but laugh, falling to one knee as he was overcome by the humor of what just happened. So he was caught completely off-guard when a Neji-shaped mass of mud erupted from the instant swamp and speared him between the eyes with a Jyuuken strike. The green-clad genin stiffened as his frontal lobes were shredded, destroying most of his higher brain functions.

Then he exploded into a cloud of vapor.

Neji spun around as a piece of debris disappeared in a puff of smoke, leaving Uzumaki Naruto standing in its place. Naruto's fist dug into Neji's stomach, blowing him backward off his feet. "Your eyes can see through genjutsu," Naruto told him as he stalked toward the Hyuuga prodigy, who was now covered in mud, struggling to his knees, missing both his forehead protector and his silly-ass hat. Neji glared as he clutched his stomach. "But I showed you what you expected to see. What use are those fancy eyes if you won't use them?" Naruto asked.

"I can see that you've come within range of my divination," Neji snapped, surging to his feet with greater speed than he'd shown a moment ago. "Divination Field: Sixty-Four Strikes!"

Naruto had glimpsed Hinata do something like this once, but she couldn't really explain it or even replicate it when they sparred. Now

Naruto got a much better view of it than he really wanted. The Hyuuga's hands moved with blinding speed. "Two strikes!" and two sharp pains registered in Naruto's mind. "Four strikes!" and Naruto now felt four, all on his torso. "Eight strikes!" and he realized that Neji was hitting his tenketsu points with unerring precision. "Sixteen strikes!" It looked like he was trying to close all of them. "Thirty-two strikes!" the muddy shinobi shouted as his hands stabbed Naruto like knives, inflicting immense pain even as they deadened everything they touched. "Sixty-four strikes!" and Naruto flew backwards from the storm of chakra strikes, landing in a heap on the ground.

Neji settled back into a ready stance, ignoring the slowly-drying mud that dripped from his arms. "I have closed all the tenketsu on your body," he announced, "and thus your fate is sealed. This fight is over."

Naruto grunted and got his knees under him.

"Mortifying, isn't it?" Neji asked in a contemptuous tone. "You are on your knees before a power you cannot defeat, discovering just how truly powerless you really are. Your conviction that working hard will change things is only an illusion. Both for you and my cousin."

---

Up in the stands, the sudden quiet that had fallen after the fight's surprising conclusion made Neji's words audible to Hinata. She was already dismayed by the mastery of advanced Jyuuken technique Neji had demonstrated, and his cruel words only made her feel worse. Now Naruto would know the bitter sting of defeat. Would it change him? Would he blame her?

Just thinking those thoughts made something twist, deep in her stomach. This… this wasn't *right* .

She leaned forward, fingers digging into the flesh above her knees, willing Naruto to get up. To win.

---

"Is that what you think?" Naruto gasped out as he painfully climbed to his feet.

He was rewarded with the barest flicker of doubt within the white eyes of the Hyuuga genius. "Don't you realize this is futile?" Neji asked. "You're just going to get hurt worse if you continue."

"Do you think I can just walk away from this after what you did?" Naruto demanded.

"After what I did?" Neji shot back. "Do you know what they did to me?" Neji's normally restrained voice grew rough with uncontrolled emotion. He swiped the mud from his forehead. "This seal controls my fate, just as it did my father's. He died in place of the clan leader to keep the peace with Kumo."

"I know about that," Naruto replied, narrowing his eyes. "Hinata's father killed the man who kidnapped her, but is it her fault that happened? Maybe her father should have disabled him instead of killing him. Maybe it would have been better if we went to war with Kumo if they are going to do things like that. But the only thing Hinata has to do with your father or your seal is being born."

Naruto straightened and took a deep breath. "But you refuse to see the truth of that. So I'm going to have to beat it into you." He let out a harsh cry as he surged his chakra.

Uzumaki Naruto was used to re-opening his tenketsu. Doing that was a normal consequence of sparring with Hinata. But he'd never had to open all of them at once. In doing this, he discovered two things.

One, it hurt like hell. Normally, he was used to a small twinge in his chakra coils from the back pressure. This felt more like someone rammed a utility pole through them.

The second was that pushing out that much chakra all at once, when it was suddenly released by the points opening, was pretty

noticeable. Hayate, who'd been edging closer, obviously wondering if he needed to stop the fight, was bowled over. Neji, who was standing a lot closer, went airborne.

Of course, the Hyuuga managed to control his descent, landing lightly on his feet. But when he turned to face Naruto, his expression was clearly shocked. "That's impossible," he whispered. Fortunately, Naruto could read lips.

"Just as impossible as fighting against fate," Naruto said as he closed in again, "Just as impossible as fighting a Jyuuken user hand to hand."

---

Iruka inhaled sharply as he watched Naruto do the impossible. No one could counter the effects of Jyuuken. Avoiding the attacks was the only possible defense. At least, up until now.

From the choked gasps and sputtering that erupted around him, he didn't think he was alone in that opinion.

"Is it--?" one man asked behind him.

"No, it's not. We'd be able to feel it," a voice answered.

"That's good," a third one said.

"No it's not," the second voice replied. "That brat has still trumped our greatest weapon. We can't let him live with that knowledge."

Iruka's head spun around so fast he was sure he'd pulled a muscle, but the voices had already cut off. Behind him, he saw a mix of council elders and older Hyuugas, some of whom were now glaring at him with a mixture of confusion and hostility.

"Neji has not been defeated," Hyuuga Hiashi said, drawing their attention away from the disguised chuunin. Iruka quickly turned back to the match.

Naruto was now intensely grateful for every sparring session with Hinata. It took everything he'd learned, everything they'd practiced to keep up with Hyuuga Neji.

But that was the point. He was keeping up.

The Hyuuga genius couldn't seem to hit him squarely, only managing glancing blows every now and then. Of course, the chakra enhancing those blows made them hurt like hell. But Naruto just gritted his teeth and bore it, and slowly the pain would fade.

Then Neji made a sweet little hesitating juke that drew Naruto's attention to the wrong side for a moment. In that instant, the feint turned into a full on Jyuuken strike aimed at Naruto's heart.

Desperate, Naruto copied one of Hinata's moves, and bent back sharply at the waist. The powerful Jyuuken strike passed over his now horizontal torso, the chakra spike making the skin of his face tingle.

In that instant of surprise as Neji realized his strike had missed, Naruto's hands shot up and clamped around Neji's wrist. His feet left the ground and an instant later slammed squarely into Neji's ribcage. As he heard the air rush out of the Hyuuga's lungs in a startled exhalation, Naruto wrenched at the arm he held with all his strength.

There was a sickening pop as he wrenched Neji's shoulder out of its socket.

Naruto let go almost immediately and rolled to his feet. Neji fell to his knees, his right arm twisted at an odd angle. With his good hand, he hurled a brace of shuriken at Naruto.

Naruto dodged all but one of the missiles, and used a kunai to deflect that one skyward.

Neji let out a groan as he pulled on his arm, and finally wrenched it back into the socket. The surge of pain almost made him pass out. He blinked and glared at Naruto, who suddenly disappeared, only to be replaced by a familiar-looking shuriken.

He looked left and right, slowly mustering the chakra to reactivate his Byakugan. He'd already expended much more of his reserves than he expected to, but nothing about this fight had gone as he expected.

He was distracted by motion below him. Why was his shadow growing? His instincts screamed at him to move, so he threw himself to the side as something green slammed into the ground where he'd been kneeling.

When the debris settled, there was a small crater, with Uzumaki Naruto on one knee at the bottom of it. His right fist was touching the ground, in the exact center of the crater.

He looked up and met Neji's eyes. For an instant, Naruto's eyes flashed purple as he exploded forward.

---

Naruto didn't let up for an instant as he pummeled Neji. His fist snapped the Hyuuga's head back, but Naruto was already dropping to the ground to do a foot-sweep. Neji's feet were knocked out from under him so hard he was horizontal in mid-air when a hammer-fist strike to his solar plexus slammed him to the ground and the air burst from his lungs.

Neji was gasping for breath as Naruto dragged him to his feet, a handful of Neji's grimy tunic in his left hand. His head lolled loosely on his neck.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hayate opening his mouth to stop the match. He drew back his right hand, the fingers curling into claws and red chakra surging around it like hungry flames. He ripped it across Neji's face as Hayate shouted for him to stop.

Blood flew across the dirt as Neji was slammed to the ground.

He didn't move.

The match was over.

Author's Note:

Thanks again to Runsamok and Bibliophile for vetting this in short order after the last chapter. It's amazing how the words fly when you finally figure out how to make all the pieces fit together.

And you can all thank Bibliophile for raising the issue of toads being insect-eaters. That Shino freak-out scene is for you, Joe!

Hmmm… I wish people would do a little digging before they rush to correct me. According to Wikipedia, it's WHITE chrysanthemums that are used for funerals (you even see some at the Sandaime's funeral in canon) – not yellow.

And for the people freaking out because of the events of this chapter: If all you wanted was a re-hash of canon, then why are you reading fanfiction? I was surprised by the number of reviews for the last chapter from people distressed that I'm not doing everything just like the original. Some plot elements will be changed by the AU divergence, some will not. But I do have a plan, and I think the majority of you will like it. There is method to my madness!

More AU questions: Hayate didn't die because the forewarned Hokage had ANBU watching the Sand team pretty carefully. No late night meetings with Baki for him to stumble into and get pwned.

Yes, that was a Terminator quote. It seemed appropriate.

As always, my blog has progress meters showing how far I am in the new chapters. And the blog site now has forums for updates, questions, and sneak previews of upcoming chapters. Check out my profile for a link.

And, now, as promised. The winner to Team 8 Omake Contest #2:

All the entries were quite good, and longer than I anticipated. Kudos to all who participated. (You can see all the entries on my forums.)

With no further ado, I present the winner, by tjchaos:

'Chouji against Yoroi. Damn. I hope Chouji does well, although it is amazing that he and the rest of the rookies got this far.' Iruka thought to himself as he followed the other four chuunin out of the auditorium. He paused to give one last glance back over his shoulder while standing in the doorway and watched Naruto climb the stairs for a second.

Only the three lead proctors, the Hokage and the genin teams' jounin instructors would remain in the auditorium with the genin that were fighting in this preliminary round. Iruka and the four proctors he was walking with would join the other junior proctors in a nearby ready room.

Iruka looked around the room and sighed as he entered; he was still a little wobbly at times from his injuries and was surprised to see as many people there. The crowd wasn't going to make his trek across the room any easier. There were easily two or three dozen ninja scattered around the room sitting at various tables and all were intently watching the television screens that were mounted at regular intervals around the room. His eyes widened slightly as he spotted a bar along a wall. That seemed to be a strange addition but then again to even have an addition elimination round at this stage of the chuunin exam was unusual.

There was even an odd bartender standing behind the bar cleaning a glass. Iruka looked at the white haired man as he stood there. Something about the man was oddly familiar but Iruka couldn't place him. If anything the man looked like he belonged more in some high class establishment with his dark vest and sharply tied bow tie. Iruka thought the bartenders white handlebars mustache was a little over the top and his glasses made the academy instructor a little uneasy.

He couldn't quite figure out what the deal was with the glasses but he couldn't see the bartenders eyes behind the strange glasses despite the lenses not being dark. Of course the best available seat was at the bar. Iruka sighed again as he walked over and sat on one of the stools. At least he had an unobstructed view of one of the screens over the bar.

"Welcome, what would you like." The bartender said with a smile.

"You wouldn't happen to have any fruit juice would you?" Iruka replied.

"Sure, plenty of everything here. Although plain fruit juice is an odd choice with this crowd."

"I was recently released from the hospital, gotta hold off on any alcohol for a little while yet."

"Ah, that would explain it. Interesting exam this time around. Hard to believe so many Konoha rookies made it this far isn't it?" The tall man stated as he placed a glass full of fruit juice on the bar in front of Iruka and nodded to the already started fight on the screen.

"There were quite a number of exceptional students in the last class. A little odd having a bar and bartender here isn't it?" Iruka said as he took the glass, his eyes though never left the screen.

"Old Sarutobi asked me to be here, it was apparently obvious a few days ago that this round was going to happen and he wanted all of you guys to be served by the best." The strange man stated with a smile.

Iruka glanced around as he simply nodded to the bartender and noted there was some betting going on around the room. None of the bettors favored Chouji but at 3 to 1 odds there were several willing to wager a bit of cash on the young Akimichi.

"Doesn't look too good for the heavy set kid." The bartender muttered as the fight progressed.

Suddenly the sound from the televisions vanished. Iruka thought he heard a very faint 'shit' emanate from the various speakers but it was so low he could have been mistaken.

"I think the 'heavy set kid' as you called him just won the match." Iruka smiled at the bartenders puzzled look.

Sure enough, in a surprisingly short time Hayate was declaring Chouji the winner and called for the medic-nins.

The room was relatively quiet for the next round. There were some odd rumors going around concerning the genin team from Suna. Nobody seemed to actually know anything substantial about the young blond woman facing Tenten. None of them cared to place any bets against one of their own, at least not when facing a foreign ninja tied to those odd rumors going around.

As the two young women walked down to the lower floor the only conversation that seemed to really be going on around the room was how impressed everyone was with the camera crews. It wasn't easy coordinating a few hidden cameras to the television feed well enough to capture the action on the floor well. Granted they only had the one fight so far to judge but none of them had any complaints. That conversation died out when someone mentioned that they were pretty sure that blond Suna genin was sixteen and the younger chuunin were suddenly watching the screen a little more intently.

Iruka snorted slightly in amusement at the change in conversation he was hearing. His slight amusement quickly died off as he watched Tenten's first attacks brushed aside as though they were nothing. His eyes widened slightly at how quickly Tenten was defeated and there was plenty of muttering around the room at the end of the match to match his own surprise at the match.

The rooms attention switched to the television that always showed status board. It quickly the names of Aburame Shino and Inuzuka Kiba and the room erupted in a flurry of betting. Everyone was betting evenly and Iruka placed a small bet on Shino. He mused to himself that just a few months ago he likely would have bet on Kiba but knowing their respective sensei and teammates, Iruka believed that Shino now held the advantage.

Kiba and Shino put up the best fight seen so far and some of the chuunin in the room were actually cheering for whichever genin they had bet on. Still the match was only a few minutes and Iruka was tempted to roll his eyes at the reactions a few of his fellow ninja displayed at the sight of the two streams of kikai that were moving from Kiba and Akamaru to Shino.

As the board displayed the next fight there wasn't any enthusiasm in betting on it. Apparently the Nara reputation for laziness was rather well known and dampened the betting. Iruka himself didn't bet and was curious to see if Shikamaru would actually fight or if he would simply go through a few motions and withdraw. It was hard to tell with Shikamaru, sometimes he couldn't be motivated to do anything but occasionally, if there wasn't much effort required, he would rise to the occasion well sort of anyway.

That fight was relatively quick as well. Iruka stared at the screen for a few moments and wondered how many other people noticed that Shikamaru hadn't even moved from his starting position. Iruka shook his head slightly and slowly at the rather stunning display of laziness, even though it was rather effective in this case.

Iruka felt as though a hand of ice suddenly grabbed his heart as he read the next two names. Neji against Hinata. There was simply no way this was going to go well. Once again the interest in betting died as the crowd of Konoha ninja grew silent and the all watched the various screens intently. Despite the Hyuuga reputation of being the best fighters in the village actually being able to watch one of the famous clan fight was rare. To be able to see two face off against each other was unprecedented. Factor in Neji's growing reputation

as a 'genius' and the fact that virtually nothing similar was ever said about Hinata effectively killed any betting. Iruka glanced around at several Shinobi as they grumbled over the lack of any betting prospects for this fight. So far only the fight between Shino and Kiba had actually done anything to satisfy the urge to gamble that permeated the room.

The room grew quiet as they all listened to Neji basically taunt and insult Hinata. The young mans harsh words caused Iruka to grind his teeth together.

As the match really got started the entire room grew quiet as they all watched. Everyone was stricken by silence at the raw intensity of the two young ninja as they fought. It wasn't long before they all clearly heard Neji as he smiled and told Hinata that she had lost. Although to most everyone watching, it had looked like she was the only one to score any sort of decent hit with that palm strike to Neji's stomach just before he claimed she had lost.

Hinata's Byakugan faded and she pushed up her sleeve to reveal several small chakra burns dotting along her arm.

"Whoa." Shiranui Genma stated softly.

"What?" Kamizuki Izumo asked.

"Neji is correct, she's lost. He's shut off her ability to mold chakra. She can't use Jyuuken, ninjutsu or probably even genjutsu won't work for her now. Not that it's likely she knew any genjutsu that could fool Neji's Byakugan." Genma answered.

"But how, when? Hagene Kotetsu piped in.

"It appears that Neji is even more gifted than his reputation made him out to be. We just witnessed a rather impressive example of the Hyuuga Jyuuken. It seems that he managed to strike and close her tenketsu not only fast enough for us not to see it but judging by her

reaction, possibly fast enough that Hinata didn't realize at first either."

"Whoa is right." Mozuku added.

The fight quickly resumed much to the surprise of many of the jounin and older chuunin in the room. It didn't make sense for the young woman to continue fighting at this point many of them thought.

The low muttering going on around the room died away as the fight became even more intense and far more brutal than before. The silence continued and it was surprisingly obvious that many of the people in the room were watching Neji with disapproval on their faces. Before long it was over and almost all of the previous looks of disapproval had turned to disgust.

"So, any idea what was with the little blond kid who pulled a kawarimi with that poor girl?" The bartender asked Iruka as the chuunin scowled.

"They're very good friends." Iruka said softly, he didn't think Naruto was going to take what happened to Hinata well at all.

The next fight was announced and this time the betting returned. Granted the previous enthusiasm was gone, the last match had left a sour taste in everyone's mouth. Iruka winced as he watched Ino and Sakura walk to the arena floor. This was likely to be a rougher fight than what most would assume by just looking at the girls. As the blond and pink haired girls fought the room began to liven up and the betting actually began to increase as the fight continued.

A few moments later the room grew quieter as the two unconscious girls were removed from the floor and the next match was announced. Nobody had bet that the fight would be a draw and the undertone of irritated muttering returned. Almost everyone was not only upset with the last stalemate but they were all disappointed over the lack of any betting prospects for this match, after all who in their

right mind would bet on Naruto of all people in a fight against Uchiha Saske? Umino Iruka smiled.

"So what kind odds can I get for Naruto." Iruka stated calmly as he pulled a thick envelope out of his vest.

For a brief moment almost everyone froze as they all eyed the well packed bank envelope. That moment didn't last more than maybe a second before there was a mad rush to Iruka.

"I'll give you five to one!" Suzume Namida called out.

"I'll give you eight to one!" Tobitake Tonbo yelled out.

"Ten to one! I know the Uchiha clan well and there's no way that kid can beat a Uchiha, especially Sasuke." Funeno Daikoku called out as he smugly crossed his arms for a moment before quickly pulling out his own wallet.

"For five percent, I'll hold all the bets." The bartender said with a smile as more and more money appeared.

"I've got several weeks pay here and I'll put it all on Naruto." Iruka called out to the room as he put the envelope down onto the bar.

Iruka eyed the bartender with a hint of suspicion as the mans hands blurred and Iruka's money was suddenly organized into separate piles coupled with corresponding piles from each person betting against Naruto. The bartender had even managed to somehow tag each pile with the appropriate name of whoever put up their money against Iruka's.

"Pretty impressive." Iruka said to the white haired man as he nodded to the well organized bets.

"Lots of practice placing bets and making drinks under pressure." The man answered with a broad smile.

"So how come you didn't help out with any of the earlier betting?" Iruka asked as he watched more and more separate piles appear as the crowd flowed up to the bar and each person drifted back after placing their bet.

"All of that was too spread out and you're the only one betting on that kid. Trust me you need a bit of help if you really want to bet all of your money like this and actually find enough people who have the cash on them to make good on ten to one odds." The man continued as his hands maintained their blurred sorting action.

"Are you sure you really want to do this? I didn't think you suffered any serious head injuries when those missing nin grabbed Konohamaru." Genma asked as he sat down next to Iruka.

"Definitely. What about you, not betting on the Uchiha?" Iruka said with a rather large smile.

"Nope, I think I'll sit this one out. That blond kid is full of surprises and after the first exam I wouldn't bet against him, certainly not at the odds you're getting anyway. Whatever Kurenai is doing with his training has really changed him. The kid even managed to impress Ibiki for the first part of the exam. Heck I not sure I'd even want to face him now, it's down right unsettling how easily he generates shadow clones." Genma's voice dropped after his first sentence so only Iruka and the bartender actually heard him continue talking.

"Shadow clones? Isn't that a high level jutsu?" The bartender asked with sudden interest as he looked to a screen himself.

"Yeah, Naruto is quite gifted with them despite only being a genin. Genma here had a run in with a few henged clones of Narutos a few days ago.

The room erupted in laughter as Naruto leaped to the auditorium floor and nearly fell on his face. Iruka stole a glance to Genma and was surprised to see a rather calculating smile on the face of the special jounin.

"Maybe you'd like to place a bet of your own on the kid?" The bartender asked Genma.

"Nah, I'm good. This just might be Iruka's time to shine." Genma nodded to the screen and the senbon needle in his mouth twitched with his growing smile.

There were a couple of snippets of snide muttering as Sasuke taunted Naruto about Hinata. Iruka glanced around and was happy to see that despite those few remarks the majority of the room was frowning at Sasukes words.

Hayate's voice saying 'Begin' emanated from the televisions and the crowd erupted in cheering as they anticipated an easy victory for the Uchiha. The cheering stopped almost instantly as a shocked silence took hold of the room. Exclamations of disbelief began to pop up around the room and Iruka smiled broadly as Naruto gave a dark glare towards the unconscious Uchiha before he turned and began to walk towards the exit.

The room was in such a state of shock that most people in the room actually missed the beginning of the last match and no bets were placed. In short order everyone began watching the match intently though. The Suna genin was using some rather unusual jutsu that was like nothing any of them had ever seen before. There was also a lot of interest in seeing Gai's student that no ability to mold chakra fight and the young mans taijutsu skill impressed all of them greatly.

Everyone waited a bit after the match before leaving in order to show their respect to the Hokage as he explained the next stage of the exam.

"Five percent I believe you said?" Iruka asked with a smile as he began to gather all of his winnings and split off the bartenders take.

"That's correct." The man smiled himself as Iruka finished adding to the smaller pile for the bartender.

"Thanks for that, there was no way I would have been able to make all those bets without you."

"No problem. That was an interesting kid you were betting on."

"You don't know the half of it." Iruka said with a chuckle as he walked out of the room with a wave.

# All That and a Bag of Chips

Chapter 17

Chapter 17

Haruno Sakura felt her mouth drop open as she watched the medic-nins run out into the arena and carefully place the body of Hyuuga Neji onto a stretcher. She barely saw them carry the genin away. Instead, her eyes were fixed on the blood spattered on the ground.

"Damn, that was cold," Kiba murmured next to her, jolting her out of her shocked reverie.

"Hn," Sasuke grunted. Sakura turned towards her crush, but his eyes were intently fixed on Uzumaki Naruto. Their former classmate appeared to be getting chewed out by Gekko Hayate, the jonin referee.

Sakura turned to her sensei, who was sitting in the row behind them. He'd allowed them a break from training in order to watch the finals, for which she was very grateful. "I never thought Naruto could be so… brutal," she said after a moment, hoping Kakashi could explain what they'd just seen. He'd been better about doing that lately.

The last month had been very different from their earlier training. During the first team meeting since their elimination in the preliminaries, Kakashi-sensei had said he'd been very disappointed by their poor showing. Sasuke, who'd been silent since the medic-nins fixed his jaw, simply exploded, demanding that Kakashi train them. Kakashi-sensei had *claimed* that he was allowing them to develop their own skills, but if they couldn't be that responsible… What followed had been the most grueling work-out Team 7 had ever undertaken.

Since then, every team exercise had been like that. Kakashi-sensei had even started showing up for meetings on time—mostly—and his little orange books had been conspicuously absent.

Sakura jumped when Kiba made a disparaging noise. "I thought you were the brains of this team, Haruno," he said in a challenging tone. "You saw what that jerk did to Hinata."

Sakura turned back toward her teammate, since Kakashi-sensei hadn't even acknowledged her question. "You think he's still that angry about it?" she asked.

What she'd seen was… so far beyond what she expected from Naruto, it just didn't make sense to her.

"She's his partner," Kiba replied with a shrug.

Sakura felt her eyes bug out at her teammate's insinuation. "Hinata is a *nice* girl!" she snapped, slapping the back of Kiba's head. He'd let slip once that his sister did that to him, and it really irritated him. It was Sakura's best weapon for keeping the crude Inuzuka in line.

"Not like that," Kiba protested, blocking her second swat. "Who has the dirty mind now?" he asked with a smirk. "Look, she's his teammate, and they train together almost constantly. Akamaru and I run across their scents all the time, especially near the training grounds. How often do you see one without the other during the day? At least before her idiot cousin put her in the hospital."

Sakura frowned. "Why didn't you say so then?" she asked.

"I meant partner, like Akamaru," Kiba shot back. "If someone deliberately hurt him, I'd kill them." The puppy wrapped around his neck yipped and licked Kiba's cheek, making him blink.

"That's why Sasuke's strategy was flawed," Kakashi-sensei said in a contemplative tone. "Taunting him did provoke a reaction, but since he couldn't attack Neji, you took his place. Maybe you got off lightly."

With that, Kakashi-sensei reached forward and mussed Sasuke's hair, which Sakura knew irritated him to no end.

But was that the only reason Sasuke-kun's scowl deepened?

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Naruto scowled up at Hayate.

"Do you understand?" the jonin asked again. "One more late hit and I'll throw you out of here myself!"

"It wasn't a late hit," Naruto said, swallowing his anger. "You didn't say anything until after I hit him."

"You already had him beat," Hayate said in a lower voice. "That was unnecessary."

Naruto narrowed his eyes. "Just like before, right?"

Hayate turned and coughed. "You aren't making yourself any friends here, Uzumaki," he said, though his voice wasn't as angry.

Naruto could hear some angry shouts mixed in with the scattered cheers. If people hated him for beating the Hyuuga prodigy, he wasn't sure he cared what they thought. "People already hate me for stupid reasons. Nothing I do here today will change that," he replied, shrugging.

Hayate sighed before raising his voice. "Winner, Uzumaki Naruto!"

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As the majority of the stadium erupted in applause, Umino Iruka turned toward his neighbors in the quietest section of the stands. "Well," he said in a cultured voice, "I suppose that *does* make it official, doesn't it?"

"It doesn't matter," one of the older Hyuugas snapped. "He must have cheated to defeat Neji. That brat could never do that on his

own. Therefore, any wagers are void."

"I say!" Iruka protested in a mild tone, "Will you be asking the Hokage to intervene? Surely he will see justice done!" He glanced around to see if anyone reacted to that. Unfortunately, Hyuuga Hiashi had left the moment his nephew had been knocked out. Inwardly, he was pleased that they seemed to have forgotten his earlier slip.

"I have every confidence he will see things our way once this is all over," a fat man in a richly brocaded robe announced.

"Very well," Iruka conceded, "if that is the case, I will be sure to return your wagers immediately."

"Return?" the fat man asked.

"Well yes," Iruka said with a smile. "Our wagers are, after all, contingent on the official outcome of the match. At the current time, that outcome is a victory for this Uzumaki ruffian. While I wouldn't dream of doubting your word that justice will prevail for your young Neji, it would be a shocking scandal if those around us thought you were actually… reneging… on your wagers."

No sooner had the words left Iruka's lips than several of his companions began glancing around. A few of the workmen and minor merchants near them did seem rather curious as to their lack of reaction to the conclusion of a spectacular match. That was more than enough to fertilize the seed of paranoia he'd planted.

In short order, Iruka was folding a collection of bank notes, money orders, and what looked like the deed to some sort of shop. "Well, I am simply famished," he announced. "I think I will make my way to one of the food sellers before the next match begins. If this decision is reversed, you may of course contact me through the Hokage's visitor registry. I am staying with a distant cousin, one Umino Iruka."

With that, he made his way through the crowds as the next match was announced. He was a little worried that Naruto might have gone too far with Hyuuga Neji, but he accepted that if he had, it was with reason. He'd just shown people the folly of doubting Naruto – he wasn't about to start doing it himself. He just hoped Naruto would accept a really big bowl of ramen in lieu of some cheering.

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Despite everything that had happened, Naruto was still surprised by the reaction of the spectators as he turned to retrieve his weights. He wasn't completely happy with how the match had gone, but he had won, after all. He just wasn't used to people clapping their hands and cheering. He couldn't remember the last time someone outside his circle of precious people had recognized his efforts.

But it felt really good.

Recognizing that warm glow, he finally did remember. Shino's parents. Mastering his emotions was hard, but he swallowed and reacted the way Hinata had shown him that night. He turned toward the Hokage's box and bowed deeply. Then he turned toward the center of the audience seating and repeated the gesture. The cheers grew even louder and Naruto found his hands were shaking a little as he pulled his chakra-enhanced weights from where they'd embedded themselves in the ground.

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Kurenai felt her smile growing wider. She glanced over at Hinata, who appeared rooted in place. Naruto's gracious acknowledgement of the praise could only have one ultimate source, but she didn't think her subordinate recognized that.

The girl seemed somewhat disturbed by the brutal conclusion of the match, but she needed to recognize the necessity of what had just happened. She also needed to understand that she *did* have value, and that what happened to her at the preliminary matches had to have consequences.

Kurenai shook her head, even as her hands continued adding to the applause. That was a concern for another day. She wasn't as concerned about Shino's match, but something could still go wrong.

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Naruto was still adjusting his wrist weights when he made his way back to the examinee's balcony.

"Did you fulfill all your stated objectives?" Shino asked, turning toward him.

Naruto nodded. "Pretty much."

"It was difficult to ascertain at long distance," Shino observed, "but the damage appeared extensive."

Naruto shrugged. "I did what I set out to do."

Shikamaru glanced back and forth between the two of them. "You're not up to something troublesome, are you?" he finally asked in a disgusted voice.

"We are establishing a precedent regarding acceptable behavior towards allies and team members," Shino announced. "To that end, we propose to demonstrate a willingness to use any and all means to obtain an equitable response, ranging from coercion, influence, and tactical intelligence, to, as needed, extreme levels of physical violence."

Shikamaru rolled his eyes and sighed.

"How would you feel if someone hurt Ino and put her in the hospital for three weeks?" Naruto demanded, frowning.

"Relieved," Shikamaru said, but then let out a grunt when Chouji elbowed him. "Okay, that would be troublesome too. But he's her cousin. Do you think the Hyuugas are going to like you messing around in their clan's politics?"

Naruto's eyes narrowed as he regarded the lazy Nara. Despite his demeanor, his classmate was smarter than he normally acted. He probably didn't want his teachers to expect more out of him.

"That is precisely the point," Shino replied. "If we are willing to do that to her cousin, a member of a powerful and highly respected clan with a superior blood-line, then what will we do to someone else?"

"Better if your teammate wasn't so weak she needed you two to protect her," the blond girl from Suna spat in a disgusted tone. Her expression suggested that she tasted something foul.

"She's not weak," Naruto snapped, clenching his fists. Even an echo of Neji's words still had the power to enrage him. "She's been told that all her life and it's nothing but bullshit!" He made himself relax when Shino put a hand on his shoulder. The gesture from his normally reserved teammate was like a bucket of cold water on his anger.

"It's not weakness that kept Hyuuga Hinata on her feet with a collapsed lung and lacerations of the left ventricle," Shino stated. "It's not weakness that made her keep getting up to fight an opponent that knew every move of her fighting style and whom she had no real expectation of defeating. I believe the appropriate descriptor is… determination."

Naruto was vaguely aware that Shikamaru and Chouji were openly staring at Shino. Maybe they didn't know how badly Hinata had been injured, or maybe it was the undertone of anger in the usually emotionless Aburame's voice. In any event, the coldly analytical burst of killing intent made the Suna girl take a step back even as the face-painted guy stepped forward.

"If you disrupt the matches, I will kill you all," Gaara said, speaking up for the first time.

While the red-headed boy was staring at Naruto when he spoke, the fear on their faces suggested that Gaara's words were directed more

towards his teammates. In any event, the two of them pointedly turned their backs on the Konoha genin and joined their brother at the railing.

Naruto swallowed. According to the dossiers Kurenai had prepared, all three of the Suna genin were children of the Kazekage. They sure didn't act like siblings as far as he could tell. Not for the first time, he wondered how accurate Hinata's guesses about Gaara's upbringing were. Would *he* act like that if no one had ever accepted him? He shuddered. Then his attention was drawn toward the arena.

"The next match," Hayate announced, his voice as loud as the wheezy chuunin could probably manage, "will be Aburame Shino versus Akimichi Chouji."

Naruto turned and gave Shino a quick nod of encouragement. Shino nodded back and turned toward the stairs. Naruto stepped out of Chouji's way as the heavy-set boy followed Shino. Then he slowly walked up to join Shikamaru at the railing.

To be honest, Naruto wasn't as worried about this match as he might have been. While the Akimichi boy had hurt his preliminary match opponent worse than anyone else, it hadn't really been intentional. The older genin he'd crushed was still recovering and, from what Naruto had heard, Asuma had to talk Chouji out of dropping out of the exam in remorse. To Naruto, it seemed like he'd sort of been asking for it, taunting Chouji like that.

But Shino wasn't that stupid, and he never underestimated his opponent. But even if Chouji did surprise him, Naruto knew he wouldn't intentionally try to inflict lasting harm. The same couldn't be said of everyone that still remained, and he found himself watching Gaara again with his peripheral vision.

As the boys walked out onto the grounds, Naruto noticed Chouji was strapping some metallic bracers to his forearms. He knew from Kurenai-sensei's notes that some Akimichi, including Chouji's father, augmented their impressive physiques with heavier armor than most

shinobi. Chouji hadn't started to do so before the exam, but watching Shino's match with Kiba evidently persuaded him to start.

Hayate appeared to speak quietly to both examinees for a moment. Naruto imagined it was more of the same "stop when I tell you to stop" stuff. Too bad he hadn't been so cautious in the preliminary matches.

Finally, Hayate signaled for them to start. To Naruto's surprise, Shino didn't immediately draw his kamas. Instead, he leaped back, putting some distance between himself and the Akimichi.

Chouji didn't waste any time, immediately using his Meatball Tank technique. It seemed to Naruto that he'd been practicing it, because his body morphed into a perfect sphere even faster than it did at the preliminary matches. Naruto frowned. It was also rolling noticeably faster than he remembered.

Thus began an extended game of tag, with Chouji chasing Shino around the arena. Shino threw a couple of kunai, but they merely bounced off the rolling juggernaut that their classmate had transformed into. Naruto frowned. He didn't think Shino's bugs could hold onto Chouji in this form either. If weapons bounced off as well, what could Shino do?

Naruto's grip on the railing tightened as it looked like Shino was getting maneuvered into a corner. Chouji turned a little tighter than Naruto thought he could, blocking Shino against a couple of small trees. Just as his teammate crouched to leap over them, Chouji put on an unexpected burst of speed and sideswiped him.

Naruto inhaled sharply.

There was a burst of splinters as Chouji ground the substitution log that took Shino's place into splinters before slamming into the arena wall. The impact made the whole stadium rumble and sent up a huge cloud of dust.

When the dust settled, Chouji was sprawled atop the small pile of rubble his technique had gouged out of the arena wall. Shino was calmly standing a short distance away, his hands in his jacket pockets.

The crowd had fallen silent, and with effort Naruto could just barely make out their words.

"That is a very impressive technique," Shino observed.

"Not impressive enough," Chouji groaned, rolling onto his knees to face his opponent.

"You were, however, able to sustain it much longer before running out of chakra," Shino said.

"That's true," Chouji agreed. But then he abruptly jerked to his feet and stepped forward. "But I'm not out of chakra! Baika no Jutsu!" he shouted, raising his right arm which ballooned out to a monstrous size. "Sorry Shino!" he said quickly as he smashed it down on the transfixed Aburame.

Naruto felt his heart skip a beat as the giant fist obliterated his friend, making a large crater in the ground.

Shikamaru grunted, sounding annoyed.

Then Naruto saw the cloud of kikai bugs settling on Chouji's arm, swarming up it even as it shrank back to normal size. Chouji swatted at them, but there were too many. A few flying bugs even settled in his hair. His motions became slower and slower as they drained his chakra, until he finally fell to his knees.

Shino stepped out from behind one of the trees.

Breathing heavily, Chouji managed to gasp out. "You- you got me. Call them off."

Shino didn't move, but the kikai bugs left Chouji's body as quickly as they'd boarded. Soon they were streaming back under his jacket to return to their nesting places – something which Naruto spent a lot of effort trying to not think about.

The crowd had fallen silent at the unexpected conclusion to the match, but the applause started up when Shino helped Chouji to his feet and Hayate belatedly declared him the victor. The cheers continued as the boys made their way off the field.

When they returned to the examinee's balcony, Naruto was amused to note that while Chouji was eating rapidly 'to restore his chakra reserves', Shino also held an unopened bag of chips in his hand.

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Up in the stands, Aburame Misato leaned against her husband's shoulder. "He's such a good boy!" she cooed.

Shibi adjusted his glasses and then nodded. "The resolution of this match without unnecessary rancor speaks well regarding his maturity and emotional restraint. It is, however, probably for the best that he was not required to meet the Hyuuga we witnessed in the first match."

Misato shrugged. "It might be better for that thug, but I think it wouldn't hurt Shino at all. You Aburame men are so quiet - it's pretty striking when you get passionate about something. It's about time Shino had a few girls after him."

Shibi turned to stare at his wife, eyebrows clearly visible above his glasses.

"What?" she asked with an innocent expression. "It worked on *me* , didn't it?"

Shibi chose not to answer that question. The other Aburames sitting near them didn't react either. Many of them had heard of Shino's

speech before the clan council and decided to attend the finals to see how he performed under a different variety of pressure.

But everyone in the clan was familiar with Misato's… eccentricities.

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Kurenai let out a quiet sigh of relief when Shino won. Chouji had performed slightly better than expected, but Shino had allowed for that as well.

"That was kind of boring," she heard someone say behind her.

"Yeah," someone else agreed. "Not like that first one. That Uzumaki kid really kicked his ass!"

"Yeah, he was definitely out for blood," an older man's voice agreed darkly. "A real killer, that one."

Kurenai felt her lips compress and glanced over at Hinata. The girl had been visibly upset before, but now she was shocked to see Hinata standing up and turning to face the men behind her.

"Naruto-kun is no more a killer than any other shinobi," she said, her voice brimming with outrage. "Shino-kun and Chouji-san are classmates, and didn't really want to hurt each other. Neji was not like that, so Naruto couldn't be either!"

As soon as she finished, Hinata appeared to become aware of everyone around them staring at her. She blushed and abruptly sat down. Kurenai gave her genin an approving smile, even as she circulated chakra in her ears to pick up the whispers of those around them.

"Who was that?"

"I think she's a Hyuuga."

"Like that Neji guy?"

"Yeah, and I think she's teammates with the Uzumaki brat and the bug creep."

"I wouldn't call him a brat. My cousin says his team saved the Hokage's grandson when he was kidnapped."

"No kidding?"

Whether she heard them or not, Hinata's expression didn't change. It was set in determined lines Kurenai hadn't seen for weeks.

Yuuhi Kurenai smiled as a knot of tension began to loosen in her stomach.

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The next match pitted Shikamaru against the Sand kunoichi, Temari, and it started off as one of the most boring fights Naruto had ever seen. The lazy genius didn't seem too pleased to be fighting a girl, but Naruto thought he'd be even less happy about getting his butt kicked by one. As it was, he took his own sweet time ambling down the stairs to the arena floor.

This unwillingness must have been apparent to Temari, because she began to look really annoyed. Hayate spoke to them briefly, but Naruto guessed that Shikamaru also must have said something because Temari suddenly looked murderous.

The Sand Kunoichi swung her fan at Shikamaru, making Hayate dive backwards to avoid being struck by the follow-through. The chakra-enhanced blast of wind threw up an enormous cloud of dust, but when it settled, there was no sign of her opponent.

A couple of minutes later, Naruto finally spotted his classmate. Shikamaru was skulking around the small glade of trees planted in the floor of the arena. Unlike the preliminary matches, the finals were held in an arena with more variable terrain. This made certain tactics possible, like the ones Shikamaru seemed to be intent on using.

Temari ground her teeth and stomped, but Naruto knew she wasn't stupid enough to run into the trees – Shikamaru's Kage Mane technique would grab her before she could do anything. Instead, she paced the area a good distance away from the grove, using her fan whenever she saw Shikamaru step out from behind a tree.

Fortunately for the lazy genius, Temari's wind attacks also threw up great clouds of dust from the dry ground, making it difficult for anyone to see where he went when he evaded her blasts. In short, the trees were taking an awful beating, with branches snapped off and strips of bark ripped from their trunks, but Shikamaru managed to avoid serious injury.

Temari began to press her attack, moving in closer. However, after one of her blasts, Naruto grinned to see a shadowy tendril emerge from the dust cloud, sliding along the ground toward Temari's feet. Unfortunately, the kunoichi saw it as well and leapt backwards just as Shikamaru's jutsu hit the limits of its reach. Temari contemptuously drew a line in the sand with her fan and thereafter refused to get closer, even for a moment. The barrage of wind attacks resumed with no further response from Shikamaru. If it wasn't for the occasional glimpse he saw, Naruto might have wondered if a stray hit had disabled him.

After almost half an hour of this, Naruto saw something fly up out of the treetops. It spun as it unfolded, revealing itself to be Shikamaru's jacket, turned into a parachute weighted down with a kunai. Shikamaru's shadow shot out again, much faster and thicker this time. It became thinner as it slowed down, but it reached much further than before. Naruto glanced up at the sun, and realized it was significantly lower in the sky now, extending the shadows of both Shikamaru and the arena walls.

Unfortunately, Temari glanced up as well, and saw the improvised parachute just as Shikamaru's tendril touched the parachute's shadow. Boosting itself off of the parachute, it arced toward Temari's feet, but she was already in motion. Leaping backward, Temari swung her fan, getting her whole body into the motion. The

parachute was flung away by the stiff wind, foiling Shikamaru's attack even as the backdraft kicked up another cloud of dust.

But when the dust cleared, it revealed Temari standing in an unnatural posture. It took only a moment for Naruto to realize that she was aping Shikamaru's stoop-shouldered crouch. As the dust settled, he saw Shikamaru's shadow extending forward from his feet, angling off toward the holes Naruto's weights had left in the ground. The sun was at a sufficiently sharp angle to leave the bottom of them in shadow, and it looked like Shikamaru had used those shadows to boost his own shadow far enough to capture Temari.

The kunoichi's face was a mask of chagrin as she straightened up and marched toward Shikamaru, just as he walked toward her. The only difference between them was that she actually held a fan in her hands, while Shikamaru's hands grasped only empty air. When they were about ten feet apart, Shikamaru peered intently at her, cocking his head to the side.

It was odd seeing Temari do the same. The grimace on her face spoke volumes.

"I could make you beat yourself unconscious with your fan," Shikamaru said with a sigh, "but that would be far too troublesome. I give up."

Shikamaru released his shadow from Temari, turned, and ambled back toward the stairs. Naruto thought he could hear a cricket chirping somewhere.

---

Temari didn't even look at Hayate as he reluctantly declared her the winner. Her face a mask of embarrassed fury, she jumped on her fan and rode it directly up to the balcony.

Naruto glanced over at the Sand genin. Gaara's face was an emotionless mask, but Kankuro was barely suppressing a smirk. But

as Temari landed, the massive killing intent she radiated seemed to make him change his mind about saying something.

Chouji side-stepped until Shino was between him and the Sand team. Naruto frowned for a moment, and then headed down the stairs at a quick trot. He didn't understand what was going on down there, but he didn't think Temari was in any mood to talk.

As he suspected, Shikamaru was less than a quarter of the way up the stairs when he met him, ambling along like he was in no particular hurry.

Shikamaru frowned when he saw Naruto. "Are they making you fight again? I didn't think your next match was for a while yet?"

"Why did you give up?" Naruto asked bluntly, taking care not to raise his voice.

Shikamaru sighed. "It's too troublesome, that's all."

Naruto shook his head. "No more troublesome than having to take the whole genin exam over again because you crapped out at the last moment."

Shikamaru's eyes narrowed. "When did you start *thinking* about something besides pranks and ramen?" he asked.

"Sensei expects more from me," Naruto answered. "And you still haven't answered my question."

Shikamaru sighed and slowly resumed his trudge up the stairs. "She was holding back."

"Temari?" Naruto asked.

"No, Amaterasu the Heavenly Empress," Shikamaru replied. "Who else would I be talking about besides Temari?"

"Sorry, geez," Naruto apologized, shrugging.

"Anyway," Shikamaru continued, "she wasn't attacking all out today, even when I came close to catching her earlier. She's conserving her strength for some reason, so I decided it might not be a good idea to squander all of mine."

"Maybe she was saving her chakra for her next match?" Naruto asked. He tried to remember who she'd be fighting next.

"I'm not quite that pathetic, Naruto," Shikamaru replied with a disgusted look. "And I did catch her in the end. I don't know if there is something going on, but if there is I will be ready."

Naruto frowned. "All right. You tell Chouji and I'll let Shino know."

---

Up in the stands, Sarutobi Asuma scowled. It was official now: both of Kurenai's students have advanced farther than his. He took a drag on his cigarette, knowing it would be the last one he would enjoy for the next couple of months. If Shikamaru had beaten both of her students in the finals, he could have claimed a victory, no matter that Chouji was defeated.

He sighed. Getting Kurenai to pose for that swimsuit calendar would have been a major coup. He would even have allowed her to choose a tasteful, conservative suit. The fact that he'd gotten her to do it would have made him the envy of Konohagakure – at least the male half.

He shook his head, annoyed at his lazy genius of a student. It didn't make sense. He'd told Shikamaru that if he forfeited he'd be paired with Ino for every group exercise until the end of the year. Usually, Asuma partnered up with the bossy blond himself to give the boys a break – something he knew Shikamaru appreciated. So why would…?

Asuma's frown deepened. He sat up in his seat and tugged on the sides of his vest to straighten it. This also gave his fingers the chance to loosen his trench knives in their scabbards. He glanced

across several rows to where Kakashi was sitting and caught the jonin's eye.

Something might be up.

He glanced over to where Ino was sitting with her parents. She would be all right there. Too bad Gai hadn't returned to his seat yet.

---

For obvious reasons, the arena had a small but well-equipped infirmary. The nature of shinobi combat was such that immediately life-threatening wounds were always a possibility, so sending the injured across town to the hospital wasn't an option.

Two men, one garbed in flowing white, the other in stretchy green, confronted each other in the hallway outside the medical bay. It was fortunate that the room was chakra shielded to aid in performing delicate medical jutsu. For if the seals carved into the walls had not been there, the massive killing intent in the hall might have distracted the medics from their urgent work.

"They are still seeing to him," Maito Gai said in a quiet voice. "He's lost a lot of blood."

Hyuuga Hiashi's eyes narrowed marginally. "I'm sure you feel quite vindicated after he spurned your assistance this past month." The words were spoken in a calm tone, but the undercurrent of venom was unmistakable.

Gai shook his head. "No. It was his choice to make. As it will be his choice whether he learns the youthful lesson or not."

"Lesson?" Hiashi inquired in a polite, but cold voice. A minute vertical crease had appeared between his eyebrows.

"Neji has finally encountered a foe that all of his anger and his bitterness could not defeat," Gai declared. "If he takes the correct

path and casts aside his past, he will finally be able to stoke the fires of his youth!"

With every word from Gai, the crease deepened until it began to resemble a drawn-together scar. "Enough!" Hiashi finally snapped. "No more of your drivel! Neji failed today, and has drawn shame to the Hyuuga name. He will make amends for this. And if he extracts any of your 'youthful lessons' from this utter failure, I'll activate his seal myself."

Hiashi spun toward a nurse who'd stepped out of the clinic to see what all the shouting was about. She froze in place, terrified at being subjected to such massive killing intent. "I am to be informed the moment Hyuuga Neji regains consciousness, is that clear?"

It took a moment for the hapless woman to find her voice again. "Y-yes, Hiashi-sama!" she finally stammered.

Hiashi spun on his heel and stalked off.

Gai quietly cleared his throat, jerking the woman out of her relieved reverie. "How is Neji doing?" he asked in a quiet voice.

---

By the time Naruto and Shikamaru made it back up the stairs, Shino and Chouji were openly staring at the Sand team.

"Hey, do I look stupid or something?" Kankuro demanded belligerently.

"What's wrong?" Naruto asked.

Shino turned towards him, but Naruto had a feeling his attention was still focused on the Suna shinobi. "Kankuro forfeited as soon as his match with Gaara was announced," he said.

Surprised, Naruto turned toward the face-painted ninja. But the boy just shrugged. "I know there's no way I can beat Gaara, so it's stupid

to even try."

Remembering Shikamaru's observations, Naruto began to feel even more uneasy. "Yeah, but between this and getting a bye in the preliminaries, aren't you pretty much guaranteed not to be made a chuunin?" he asked with what he hoped looked like honest confusion.

Kankuro's hesitation was slight, but unmistakable. "I'm not in any real hurry to advance," he replied in a casual tone.

Naruto shook his head in puzzlement. "Whatever," he said and went to go stand by his teammate.

"Suna is up to something," Naruto murmured under his breath as soon as Shino's mass blocked any view they might have had of his lips.

"I concur," Shino replied.

After a quick consultation with the two Kage, Hayate returned to the arena floor. "The next match will be Uzumaki Naruto and Sabaku no Gaara."

---

Only iron control kept Kurenai's face from betraying any emotion. Despite her unease with this turn of events, she was forced to admit the Hokage probably had his reasons. Gaara had yet to face anyone, and Naruto had the most time to recover from his previous match. Moreover, given his stamina, she had little doubt that her genin was as ready as he would ever be. And if Gaara's aggressive behavior got out of control, he was probably the best equipped to survive it.

But that didn't mean she had to like it.

Glancing over at her subordinate, it wasn't hard to see the concern on Hinata's face. Given her confidence in Naruto's capabilities, it

might have seemed a little out of place.

But it was also true that Hinata had encountered Sabaku no Gaara at a time when the bland demeanor shielding his bloodlust was wholly absent.

Kurenai felt her unease grow stronger by the second.

---

Iruka fought off a wave of worried nausea as he sat down in the seat Ichiraku Teuchi and his daughter Ayame had saved for him. His rich kimono drew a few odd looks from their neighbors, but he ignored them. A quick nod confirmed that the plan had worked, making Teuchi break out into a wide smile that Iruka did not share.

He should have expected Naruto would eventually face Gaara, but he'd hoped it would have been later. Perhaps after the disturbing boy had done something to get himself disqualified. He shook his head. Not that it was likely, given his parentage. But the few hints he'd picked up from Kurenai implied that he wasn't the only one concerned.

"Who's this red-headed kid he's fighting now?" Ayame asked, peering over at Iruka with clear concern.

"Dangerous," Iruka said.

---

The Third Hokage of Konohagakure straightened slightly in his seat, trying to find a posture that would ease the aching in his tired old bones. He glanced over at his fellow Kage, wondering what was going through the man's mind.

When Hayate appeared before them to consult on the second round of matches, the Kazekage had seemed unusually interested in seeing Naruto pitted against his son. Perhaps he felt that only another jinchuuriki could provide an adequate test for his prodigy.

Perhaps he wished to make some subtle point regarding the relative strengths of the two allied villages.

Perhaps it was a waste of time to try and understand a man who could order an already bound demon be sealed within his youngest son.

"This should be a very… illuminating contest," the Kazekage murmured.

Sarutobi nodded, not trusting his voice.

---

Naruto grinned. He was going to make a point of being extra nice to Oji-san next time he talked to him. He'd much rather fight Gaara than Shino, and volunteering *him* to fight the Suna jinchuuriki was a vote of confidence in his abilities that he wouldn't forget any time soon. Not to mention him being the Kazekage's son…

While Gaara made his way toward the stairs, Naruto vaulted over the railing, landing near the entry arch in a deep crouch. Dusting himself off, he ignored the murmurs of the crowd as he made his way over to Hayate before Gaara even appeared.

He didn't think the weird kid would try anything on the stairs, but better not to take any chances.

"You ready for this?" Hayate murmured without moving his lips.

Naruto gave a short nod. The murmuring of the audience was quite audible. He didn't know if they were talking about his last match or wondering if he was about to get creamed. It didn't really matter though. For once, they weren't ignoring him. For once, everyone was looking at Uzumaki Naruto. It was an odd feeling, especially for a ninja. Was this how the old man felt every day? Was this part of being Hokage?

The crowds became louder as Gaara emerged from the archway. Naruto bounced lightly on the balls of his feet, trying to loosen up until Hayate gave him a sharp look.

In sharp contrast, Gaara stood there as if ignoring everything in the world – except Naruto. His dark-ringed eyes bored into Naruto's. "Will you validate my existence?" he asked in a dry whisper.

"Begin!" Hayate announced, but he was already in mid-air, leaping back and away from the two combatants.

Naruto didn't waste any time. He charged in, attacking as hard and as fast as he could manage. Sand flowed out of the calabash gourd on Gaara's back. It surged around him, blocking every attack, and then reached out to grab Naruto.

Naruto darted in and out, trying to get a feel for how fast the sand could move. After a couple of near misses, he leapt backward. Gaara hadn't even moved from the spot he started the fight in.

"Let's see how fast you are with *wet* sand!" Naruto taunted. "Suiton: Condensation!" he cried as he finished the seals, pumping as much chakra into the technique as he could manage without totally disrupting it.

A geyser of water roared out of the vortex that formed in front of Naruto's clasped hands. It shot toward Gaara, only to be blocked by the sand. Huge clots of wet sand flew in a spray around the Suna genin, but as he frowned, the sand shielding him compressed more and more until the water just sprayed off it to little effect.

Landing in a crouch, Naruto grinned. The spatters of wet sand were returning to Gaara, but nowhere near as quickly as they normally moved. "Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!" he called out, surrounding his enemy with clones. The clones scattered, throwing kunai and loose stones, dodging back as tendrils of sand lashed out at them.

Naruto circled around, dodging like crazy, even using Kawarimi no Jutsu to switch places with his clones to avoid pounding hammers of sand. Every time he got a clear shot, he blasted Gaara with another overloaded Suiton fire-hose. It was getting harder and harder to do as he leeched most of the free moisture from the air and ground of the arena. But it forced Gaara to tie up more and more of his sand into forming a sandstone shell around him to stop the blasts.

Finally, Gaara had completely surrounded himself with a sphere of compressed sand that seemed impervious to Naruto's attacks. Kunai glanced off, and any of his clones that wandered too close were impaled on spikes that grew out of the surface.

That's when Naruto dropped to the ground a good ten meters from his foe and used his trump card against ultimate defenses. "Doton: Yomi Numa!" he said as he stamped the ground. Funneling the chakra through his leg was good practice…

And it looked really cool as well.

As before, the ground dropped away in front of him, being converted into swampy mire as all the standing water from his Suiton attacks was pulled into the Swamp of the Underworld technique. Gaara's sphere immediately began to descend into the muck – sandstone, natural or not, was *heavy* .

As Naruto watched it drop into the mud, a much smaller sphere that looked eerily like an eye appeared on top of Gaara's refuge. It quickly looked left and right in a way that suggested startled panic. Naruto's grin widened. It looked like his guess had paid off.

Ultimate Defense or not, Gaara still needed to breathe.

The stone sphere split apart like an orange peel, wedge-shaped sections peeling back and elongating as they reached toward the edges of Naruto's swamp. Gaara was revealed, standing on the lower half of the stony sphere as it raised itself above the mire.

Naruto flashed forward, his weights left on the ground behind him.

Charging into Sabaku no Gaara's defenses at anything less than full speed was suicide, so he pushed himself to go as fast as possible. Lee had managed to avoid the sand for a while, even before opening his celestial gates, so Naruto thought the risk was worth it. He cleared half the width of his swamp in a single running leap.

Evidently the sand moved slower when compressed, because it didn't immediately grab his foot when he landed and punched Gaara full on in the face. The startled Sand shinobi didn't even try to block and Naruto wondered if he knew any taijutsu.

Still, Naruto's fist felt like he'd punched a tree as Gaara catapulted backward off of the platform. It must have been that stupid final layer of sand that had protected Gaara from Lee's attacks. Naruto leapt clear just as the sand reached for his feet. He'd angled the blow upwards to knock Gaara completely clear of the swamp, and the follow-up kick he'd landed in mid-air slammed Gaara to the ground well clear of the jutsu.

Wisps of sand were already detaching themselves from the remains of Gaara's calabash and reaching towards Naruto. When he landed he pivoted and ran *past* Gaara, hammerfisting the back of his opponent's head as he went. Gaara was catapulted off of his feet, landing even farther from the swamp.

Naruto wasn't sure if Gaara's control over his sand grew weaker with distance or not, but getting him farther away from the mass slowly pushing itself out of the swamp seemed like a good idea.

Gaara's remaining sand cushioned his landing, so Naruto gave him another fire-hose blast from Suiton: Condensation. This far away from his previous uses of the technique, it worked much better than the last few times he'd tried it, and Gaara was sent tumbling.

So far, his plan was working perfectly.

---

Kurenai couldn't help but raise her eyebrows at her student's aggressive tactics. Evidently, he was trying to deny Gaara any opportunity to collect himself and was wearing down his defenses by tying up his sand in various ways.

So far, it seemed to be working, but she wondered if Naruto had placed too great a reliance on the information she'd gathered.

---

"Wow, Naruto's really cleaning his clock," Teuchi said in a low voice. Ayame was biting her knuckle in an attempt to stifle her squeals.

Iruka nodded slowly, amazed by how much his one-time problem student had progressed. At the same time, he worried about what he'd overheard earlier. Naruto's enemies would never again assume he was no threat. He just hoped the boy was ready.

---

Naruto's knuckles were throbbing, but Gaara's armor of sand looked more like a jigsaw puzzle. He landed an uppercut under Gaara's jaw that sent a jolt of pain down the length of his forearm. Gaara, however, was lifted off his feet and landed in a heap.

Mindful of Hayate's wrath and the fact that this was the Kazekage's son, Naruto paused for a second before kicking him again. "Do you want to stop this, Gaara-san?" he asked.

Gaara ignored the question. Instead, he reached with trembling fingers toward his mouth, which was now bleeding freely from a split lip. Blotting the crimson with his fingertips, he pulled his hand back and stared at it. And then screamed.

A burst of golden-colored chakra sent Naruto stumbling backwards. Gaara's bloody hand morphed into a monstrous tan appendage far too big for the body it was attached to. It lashed out with shocking speed and sent Naruto flying backwards.

Gaara staggered to his feet, his arm slowly returning to normal. Naruto barely saw the shadow forming around him in time to leap clear before a tidal wave of sand engulfed him. He landed awkwardly, still dazed from the blow, and rolled to his feet in time to see Gaara's sand return to him.

---

Up in the stands, people began falling asleep as visions of falling feathers dulled their wits.

Kurenai felt the illusionary technique as soon as it began. It wasn't especially hard to resist, but what was surprising was how wide-spread it seemed to be. Someone with great skill had expended an enormous amount of chakra to envelop the entire stadium in a wide area sleep compulsion. The genjutsu was, in fact, so wide spread that she couldn't really home in on the source of the technique either.

With some pride, she noticed Hinata suppressing her own chakra to shed the effects with almost the same speed as her teacher.

---

Shino's colonies registered the presence of foreign chakra even as he noticed the motion in the stands as the spectators began keeling over. If his assumption was correct and this was a genjutsu effect, it did not seem to extend downward to the examinee balcony. He turned slightly to examine the Suna shinobi using his peripheral vision. Their body language proclaimed that they were tense and expectant, but not surprised by this turn of events.

He twitched his fingers to signal Shikamaru as he ordered both his colonies to attack the sand ninjas. If he was incorrect in his projections, he would deal with the consequences later.

Kikai bugs poured out from under his jacket, coating the floor as they surged toward the enemies of Konoha.

---

Sabaku no Gaara weaved unsteadily on his feet, clearly disoriented from the beating he'd just taken. However, he had reclaimed his sand and Naruto knew he was back to square one. His opponent's automatic defense wouldn't likely be affected by any dizziness.

Moreover, Naruto had no idea how he'd been knocked back like that. Well, he had an idea, but it was too awful to bear thinking about. If Gaara was as hateful and isolated as Hinata guessed, maybe he'd turned to his demon…?

Gaara wasn't even paying any attention to him at the moment. He just stood there, staring at the blood on his fingertips and whispering to himself. Naruto took a deep breath and brought his hands together for another Suiton jutsu.

Even as he was molding his chakra, his attention was diverted by a loud boom as a cloud of smoke enveloped the Kage's balcony. His stomach dropped, but he told himself not to worry. Oji-san wasn't weak; he could take care of himself.

As he turned back, Temari and Kankuro leapt down to land on either side of their brother and teammate. They looked like they wanted to steady him, but were afraid of getting too close.

"He… he hurt me…" Gaara said in a disjointed voice, showing Temari the blood on his fingertips. His eyebrows drew together. "He hurt me!" Gaara took an unsteady step towards Naruto.

"Gaara, wait!" Temari began, but was cut off when a Sand jonin wearing a veil across half of his face landed between them and Naruto. He looked vaguely familiar.

"Stop this immediately! The mission has started!" he said. He turned toward Naruto and his killing intent spiked.

In a flash, Hayate appeared next to Naruto. Gone was the harassed, sickly-looking referee, and in his place was a focused jonin. Naruto swallowed.

Gaara let out a strangled cry and fell to his knees, holding his head. The Sand jonin scowled and turned. "What's wrong with him?" he asked in a harsh voice.

Temari hovered over the red-haired genin with a worried expression. "He's dazed. He might have a concussion. The Armor of Sand protected him from a lot of the damage, but it used up most of his chakra. I don't think he can use *it* anymore."

"Idiot," spat the sand jonin, who Naruto now recognized from his briefing as Baki, the Sand team's jonin-sensei. "I told him to take this seriously. Gaara is the Sand's trump card. Get him out of here until he's had time to recover. Then you will resume the mission."

Kankuro gingerly helped Gaara to his feet, hauling an arm across his shoulders.

"What about you, sensei?" Temari asked.

"I will deal with these," he replied, turning back toward Naruto and Hayate.

"You think it will be that easy?" Hayate asked as another jonin, this one with a senbon needle in his mouth and cloth tied over his hair, landed next to him.

"Go!" Baki ordered, and they leapt out of there just as a pair of kunai thudded into the ground where they'd been standing. Shino and Shikamaru, kunai in their hands, started after them, but Baki turned toward them with murder in his eyes, and they hesitated. Behind them, Naruto could see a tired Chouji puffing toward them, clearly still low on chakra.

"So," the senbon-chewing jonin said with a lazy grin that never reached his eyes. "Is Orochimaru behind this little party?"

The sound of that name had Naruto baring his teeth. If sensei was right, he owed that freak the beating of his life. Then his eyes

wandered up toward the stands. Everyone was lying down like they were asleep or dead. A few people were up, but all of them were fighting. Sensei…

"I don't know about that," Baki replied. "But none of you are leaving this arena alive."

"We'll handle this, Naruto," Hayate said, stepping between him and Baki. "I'm afraid the exam is over now. Right, Genma?"

The guy with the senbon smirked. "Just like old times. Hey, why don't you kids go report to your sensei? I think we're going to need everyone to dance today."

Naruto nodded with a grunt.

The jonin closed in on each other as the genin left.

---

Iruka ducked under a kunai as it embedded itself in the wall above him. He was able to recognize the genjutsu and disrupt it before it put him to sleep, but he couldn't remove it from Teuchi or his daughter, or any of the other spectators in their section. He wasn't carrying most of his equipment because of his infiltration mission – the Hyuugas might have sensed any weapons and been put on their guard.

But the sleeping bodyguard of a fairly prosperous-looking merchant had a short sword he was able to borrow, and he was putting it to good use against shinobi wearing Sound hitai-ite. He heard the explosion and saw the cloud of smoke where the Hokage had been sitting, but he couldn't really spare it any attention. There were enemies right here, threatening helpless civilians from *his* village. His elaborate kimono bore numerous tears from near misses, and his blade was stained with blood, but he was damned if he was going to abandon them.

Iruka dove forward into a roll as two more kunai flew toward him. One nicked his ear, but he ignored the pain as he closed in with a sound ninja that tried to use a substitution technique just an instant too late. The hilt in his hand jolted as he rammed the sword through the ninja's stomach, glancing off the spinal column.

---

Neither Naruto nor Shino wanted to risk getting trapped inside the stairwells. Ignoring their protests, Naruto grabbed Chouji while Shino grabbed the back of Shikamaru's mesh shirt and they ran up the arena wall to the stands.

Seeing all those people laid out and helpless made Naruto's stomach turn, but he concentrated on looking for motion. He saw Konoha, Suna, and Sound shinobi flash from point to point, accompanied by the clang of metal on metal. He tried to remember exactly where Kurenai-sensei was planning to sit when Shino gestured for them to follow him.

The four genin cut through three sections of seating. Naruto ignored the dead bodies, glad that most of them appeared to be wearing Hidden Sound insignia. But his stomach flip-flopped when he saw a young girl in civilian clothes with a kunai buried in her stomach, eyes opened in death. She'd never had a chance.

"Are you sure-" Naruto started to ask Shino, but stopped when he saw a shinobi wearing a grey jumpsuit with a mantle made of black and white camouflage material. The Oto-nin turned toward them, raising a kunai when a tree suddenly sprouted from the stands beside him. In an instant, the tree's limbs reached out and engulfed him, twisting his head around as he thrashed. There was a loud crack and the ninja stopped moving. The tree melted away to reveal Kurenai-sensei with her hands around the man's neck, which she quickly released.

As the dead ninja fell to the ground, Hinata stepped around her teacher, her Byakugan active. "That's the last one here, sensei," she reported in a quiet voice.

Naruto let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"Team Eight is reporting for duty," Shino said, adjusting his glasses. "We appear to have been betrayed by both Sound and Sand. There was some sort of plan involving Sabaku no Gaara, but it has been derailed by Naruto's action. The Sand genin escaped with help from their jonin instructor, who is now fighting two Konoha jonin. We were instructed by them to report to you for further orders."

Kurenai nodded, and then glanced over at Shikamaru and Chouji.

"Yeah, us too," Shikamaru added. "Asuma should have known something was up when I forfeited. Have you seen him around?"

Kurenai shook her head and the lazy genin sighed.

Turning to Naruto, Kurenai look at him intently. "Naruto, how are your chakra reserves?"

Naruto took a deep breath. He didn't feel very tired, but he wasn't quite as fidgety as normal either. "Good enough, sensei."

Kurenai looked out across the stadium. "I don't think any of our forces will be affected, but this genjutsu is rendering a lot of people helpless and we can't evacuate them all." She turned back toward her genin. "Naruto, I want you to generate a chakra pulse to dispel this for everyone."

Naruto nodded and began focusing his chakra. "How far do you want me to push it?" he asked in a tight voice.

Kurenai frowned. "I can't tell from here how far this extends. Push it as far as you can."

Naruto closed his eyes to focus, trusting his team to protect him while he was concentrating. He brought his hands together as the pressure below his hara became almost unbearable. He opened his

eyes just in time to see Hinata quickly shutting off her Byakugan, holding up a hand to shade her eyes against a bright blue glare.

"Naruto Majutsu," he growled, feeling his hair stir in an invisible wind, "Chakra Pulse!"

Naruto had spent every afternoon of the last three weeks working on ninjutsu with Jiraiya, the self-styled Toad Hermit of Konoha. In between cajoling the old pervert to show him new techniques, Naruto had also been engaging in elaborate exercises to develop his chakra control. It shouldn't have been a surprise to him that this might affect how he performed other techniques

But it was.

A shockwave pulsed out in all directions, as visible as a thick pane of glass that refracts the light. Shikamaru and Chouji grunted as it passed through them, while Shino actually winced. Kurenai and Hinata were standing a little further way, and while the jonin didn't react, Hinata did blush heavily.

But the most visible reactions were among the sleeping spectators, who immediately flinched and woke.

---

Umino Iruka was on his last legs. His clothing was torn to rags, he was covered with bruises, cuts, and scrapes, and the sword he'd appropriated had just been knocked out of his hand. The sound shinobi he'd fought, who was at least upper chuunin if not an actual jonin, wasn't looking that much better. But at least he was still armed.

Iruka flung a bloodied hunk of what used to be a 5000 ryou kimono at the Oto-nin's eyes, but he was too experienced to fall for such a trick. He slashed it out of the air without dropping his guard, cutting off Iruka's escape.

Iruka edged back into the corner, warily measuring his opponent's reach with his kunai. He was bracing himself for what would probably

be a suicidal rush when a wave of pure chakra passed through him, making him dizzy for a split-second. It wasn't enough to distract his opponent, not long enough for him to do anything anyway, but for some reason Iruka felt like he was missing something.

The Sound ninja shook his head and stepped forward. "Whatever that was, it won't be enough," he said in a cocky voice that made Iruka wish for another weapon.

Then the Oto-nin stiffened, eyes widening even as he pitched forward on his face. A brace of throwing knives protruded from the back of his tunic. Iruka looked up to see the crowd stirring, civilians as well as some shame-faced chuunin and genin.

A large man stepped forward, and Iruka recognized him as the guard he'd borrowed the short sword from. He shook his head at Iruka as he kneeled down and wrenched the knives out of the Oto-nin's back with brutal economy. As the folds of his tunic parted, Iruka could see the edge of a hitai-ite. "I don't suppose you've seen a blade around here, about three hands long?" he asked in a gruff voice.

Iruka was too tired to be embarrassed.

---

Sakura was vastly relieved when she felt the genjutsu release its hold on those around her. She'd detected it as it was forming, and she and Sasuke had been able to break it. Kiba wasn't so fast and he and Akamaru had slumped down on the bench. Kakashi-sensei brusquely ordered them both to stay put and guard their teammate while he and Ino's jonin-sensei fought the Sound ninjas that suddenly emerged from the audience.

She'd been uncomfortably reminded of their unsuccessful mission to protect Tazuna the bridge-builder. Holding a kunai, watching others battle, but knowing if they turned on her she wouldn't last a moment. Something deep inside of her wanted to turn and run from the danger. But she also knew that both Sasuke and her sensei would never truly trust her if she broke now. She'd never be able to look

Kiba in the eye if she left him to his fate. So she held her ground and waited for the inevitable.

Then a surge of chakra nearly sent her to her knees. There was something familiar about it, but she couldn't really place it. That odd sense of déjà vu was quickly forgotten as the people around her began to wake up – including Kiba and Akamaru.

Abruptly, the Sound ninja began to withdraw. It was clearly one thing to use superior numbers to face the few elite that resisted the genjutsu. But it was something else when all the chuunin and genin joined in as well.

Kakashi appeared in front of them as Kiba was standing up again, shaking his head. "Your mission is now to lead the spectators to the emergency shelters," he said with no preamble. "There are a lot of people here from outside the village who won't know where to go. Once you get them there, you will join the guard force until you are relieved. Is that clear?" Gone was the playful cajoling tone he'd used so often. In its place was the voice of an ANBU captain giving orders in an emergency.

Sasuke-kun looked rebellious, but didn't object. Sakura let out a sigh of relief.

---

Outside Konoha, teams of Sound shinobi were entering the last phases of a very elaborate summoning ritual. Such rituals were necessary to perform a summons that any one of them lacked the requisite chakra to perform.

Sitting in precisely delineated positions along and within the summoning circles, they had just unfurled their carefully-prepared scrolls when a wave of almost-solid chakra passed through the clearing.

The delicately chakra-infused summoning diagrams shattered like spun glass smashed with a sledgehammer. The carefully calibrated

summoning, designed to call forth one of Manda's oldest offspring, was irrevocably fractured. Instead of summoning a senior envoy of the Snake Leader, it called forth thousands of his newest spawn. These newborn snakes were barely larger than a finger, too mindless to understand human speech, and extremely irritable after their first summoning. They were also horrifically poisonous.

Within forty seconds every mammal in the clearing was dead.

---

Naruto dropped to his knees, panting for breath. Kurenai could tell he'd put a lot of effort into that technique.

Kurenai looked around the wakening stadium. "I knew that would be useful some day," she said approvingly. Naruto gave her a tired grin.

"While we may have foiled this gambit," Shino said, "I think there is more to their plan than a simple attack."

Naruto frowned. "The Suna kunoichi, Temari, she said something about Gaara being too dizzy and exhausted to use 'it'. Whatever that means, their sensei got really angry when he heard that. He said Gaara was the Sand's trump card."

Kurenai frowned. This was still potentially dangerous. "Where are they now?"

"They got away," Naruto said with a frown. "Their sensei told them to go, and then stayed to block us."

Shino cleared his throat.

Naruto turned to Shino. "You tagged Gaara?"

"No," Shino replied. "My allies refused to go near him."

"Damn," Naruto growled, smacking his fist into his palm.

"I did, however, tag the other two members of his team when they were on the balcony," Shino clarified, straightening his shoulders and shoving his hands into his jacket pockets.

"Good work, Shino," Kurenai said. Finding them quickly without kikai pheromones would be impossible.

"I was merely being proactive based upon cues I received from Naruto," Shino replied evenly.

"You're still a sneaky bastard," Naruto said with a weak laugh. "And you freaking rock."

"Very well," Kurenai said, thinking for a moment. "Naruto, your strategy against Gaara seemed fairly effective and it doesn't appear that he's recovered yet. You and Shino take Shikamaru and try to run them down before they can try anything else. Chouji, you seem a little tired so we will link up with Asuma and any other jonin we meet. Now that I know what to look for, if their genjutsu user tries to start this again, I should be able to locate them. Are there any questions?"

The genin shook their heads, Shikamaru perhaps a bit less than enthusiastically.

"Good. Stay alert and be careful out there," she said. "Now go."

The three boys quickly made their way to the exit. Even Asuma's laziest student showed some haste. Hinata started after them when Kurenai grabbed her shoulder. "Hinata, I don't think you are-"

"They might need my eyes, sensei," Hinata replied, turning toward her. "I will not get in their way or slow them down." The girl's face showed an implacable resolve that robbed Kurenai of any desire to stop her. She'd never seen the soft-spoken Hyuuga looking quite so fierce.

"Then hurry, Hinata," Kurenai ordered. "But be careful."

Author notes:

Many thanks to Runsamok and Bibliophile for beta work that just reeks of awesome.

Thanks also go out to the members of the Viridian Dreams forum, whose speculations and tribulations drove the expansion of a couple of otherwise minor plot points. This Iruka is for you, folks!

As far as questions regarding future canon events – don't assume they will even be issues. Events that have roots that occur before the start of this story will still have their affects… but as you can see, the outcomes may be quite different. So asking me about the timeskip is sort of meaningless right now.

And just to be clear - Shino tagged Temari and Kankuro before the first match. The attack he launched on the balcony is why they jumped down to the arena floor. No one wants to get eaten alive.

If you have questions on my upcoming chapters, I have progress bars on my blog, and you can ask questions on the forum. The links to both are in my profile.

# A Dangerous Pursuit

Chapter 18

Chapter 18

Temari set as hard a pace as she could manage with Gaara as they tried to slip out of Konoha as quickly as possible. Just thinking about needing to slow down for Gaara had her suppressing hysterical laughter.

She'd never had what you could call a normal family life. Her father treated his children like his personal soldiers: lives to be expended furthering his ambitions. Just thinking about her mother's fate drove that point home. Neither of her brothers were anything close to normal, but it said a lot that she had a closer relationship to the one that wore more makeup than she did.

Her relationship with Gaara was normally built around fear. Fear of his anger. Fear of inciting his automatic defense to lash out. Fear of being hurt. Her first memory of him was that of a cute baby with strange eyes, but it wasn't until Gaara had killed her uncle that she really understood. The demon inside her brother ruled his existence. Only her loyalty as a Suna Kunoichi prevented her from actively hating her father for what he'd ordered Chiyo-sama to do to her brother - as well as to her mother.

But that fear had also brought with it a sense of confidence. Sabaku no Gaara was simply unstoppable. In every mission that her team had performed, he'd never even been scratched. As long as she and Kankuro stayed on Gaara's good side, they shared in that strength. With Gaara on their team, they were unbeatable.

Until Konoha.

The first sign came during the second exam, with the manhandling they'd received from a small horde of fearless clones that overran their ambush as they waited for unsuspecting genin near the tower. There were so many, and they came so fast that the blond one actually got his hands on Gaara before his sand lashed out and destroyed them all. She never thought she'd see *anyone* run their knuckles across his scalp like that. Even if he couldn't feel it through his Armor of Sand, the concept was simply ludicrous.

But it was more like a glimpse of things to come.

Her match had gone about as well as could be expected. She hadn't had to display any abilities someone couldn't guess from just seeing her battle-fan. Kankuro being the odd man out and not having to fight was just a stroke of luck.

Gaara's fight was actually the hardest. That weird kid in the green stretchy suit was incredibly fast, and for a while there Gaara hadn't been able to touch him. But eventually the kid had gotten winded and his sensei stopped the match before Gaara could kill him. That only made her brother angrier.

She hadn't paid too much attention to the kid whose clone had gone after Gaara outside. He did score the quickest victory in the preliminary matches. But at first, she'd just thought his opponent had been overrated or hurt. Now she wondered if her twinge of fear *hadn't* been caused by Gaara's lingering frustration.

She was almost looking forward to Gaara's first match in the finals, hoping a little bloodshed would calm him down before they needed to use his other half. It wasn't like it really mattered how many he killed – they'd just as likely die in the attack anyway. She was not going to question the Kazekage's decision to turn on Konoha, and calming Gaara down was something she considered a very good cause.

What she hadn't expected to see was her youngest brother getting beaten like an unwanted stepchild.

This Uzumaki kid had obviously done his homework during the preceding month. He'd handled that Hyuuga like he was nothing, and left him bleeding in the dirt. But she didn't expect to see someone ever fight Gaara so effectively. His attacks tied up most of Gaara's sand, making his automatic defense less and less effective. That swamp summoning jutsu had to have been jonin level, and, with all of the clones he had created, she wondered if he was a ringer inserted into the test to take Gaara out. Had Konoha ferreted out their treacherous alliance with Otogakure?

In any event, Uzumaki had really battered Gaara, right through the Armor of Sand, before her brother could reclaim most of his sand. He'd finally had to draw on Shukaku for a moment to even get some breathing room. Between that and maintaining his armor through that ferocious beating, Gaara's chakra reserves were depleted worse than she could ever remember.

Aside from the surprises in the arena, the changes within herself were no less striking. She found she couldn't watch the match with the dispassionate gaze of a professional kunoichi. This was her youngest brother being battered left and right. This was her mother's last child getting punched so hard he was launched backward off his feet. It didn't matter if his demon made him a psychotic killer when he became angry. Or bored. He was still her blood.

It was almost a relief when she felt the genjutsu start and the creepy bug guy tried to attack them. Watching helplessly galled her more than she wanted to admit. Leaping down into the arena before his bugs could catch her, she'd still been surprised to see Gaara so weak and disoriented. He had actually needed her help to stand up straight.

He needed her.

She tightened her grip around Gaara's shoulders as they leaped from a rooftop to the outer wall. Kankuro was on point, ready to unleash fully articulated hell on anyone that got in their way, but

Konoha's defenders were concentrating on the people leaping into their village, not out.

She almost stumbled in surprise when Gaara's hand tightened for a moment on her shoulder. She could sense that his chakra reserves were replenishing moment by moment. Hopefully his head would clear as well. They still had a mission to perform, one vital to the success of the attack.

But with respect to Sabaku no Gaara, her fear of him was slowly being counterbalanced by fear for him.

---

Shino was on point, since they were following the scent trails of his bugs. Hinata was right behind him, using her Byakugan to warn of any ambushes. Shikamaru trailed behind her, grumbling at the pace they set, while Naruto brought up the rear, along with half a dozen clones running interference. Normally, he'd have made more, but Shino reminded him that they didn't want to gather too much attention from unknown hostile forces.

Not that it stopped him from dropping twenty or thirty clones every time a foreign shinobi even looked at them funny.

The extra clones were instructed not to follow them, but to instead, help Konoha's defenders. The scattered reports as they were dispelled painted an interesting picture. The Suna guys were tough as hell, but the more numerous Sound shinobi didn't seem to be quite as well-trained. Taijutsu training aside, he never expected thirty of his clones to be able to disable a jonin, even if they got extremely lucky. The first time it happened, he nearly stumbled when he received the memories. But he couldn't imagine them letting lower-ranked ninja operate alone. Well, even if they did act stupidly, including attacking Konoha like this, he'd still tell Kurenai-sensei about it. Her and Gai-sensei's efforts hadn't been wasted.

After the second set of clones had been dispatched to help out a team of chuunin, Shikamaru dropped back for a moment and began

talking to the clone in the center of the shifting formation.

"Naruto, just how many times can you do that before you start running low on chakra?" the lazy genin asked. That clone and two others nearby turned their heads along with Naruto. His classmate's tone was thoughtful, but with an undercurrent of worry.

"I don't know," the clone replied. Naruto decided to let it do the talking, since it was the one Shikamaru addressed.

"You still can't gauge your own chakra?" Shikamaru asked in a disgusted voice.

Naruto frowned. His chakra control wasn't *that* bad.

A stray kunai nicked the clone, dispelling it. Receiving its memories, Naruto knew it was just as annoyed as he was by the implication. Turning, he saw another pitched battle between two sound ninjas and an ANBU with long purple hair and a cat mask.

"Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!" he snarled and thirty clones appeared in his wake, immediately vectoring towards the melee. He turned toward Shikamaru, who was now looking over his shoulder at him. "No, it just didn't drain me enough to notice," he said sarcastically.

Shikamaru grunted something under his breath that Naruto didn't really want to hear and moved back up in the formation. When they left the stadium, Shino told him to be ready to immobilize any dangerous enemies and he'd acquiesced to that role with a shrug and a wave. Naruto figured he found this whole situation to be too troublesome for words.

---

Uzuki Yugao landed a solid kick right on the Sound ninja's forehead protector, dropping him like a rock. Spinning towards his partner, she brought her sword around in a wheel-cut that had him leaping backwards to avoid evisceration. Striding forward in a deep stance,

she was just beginning her follow-up attack when the scrape of metal on stone warned her that the first ninja was only faking.

She was pivoting back toward the threat when a third ninja slammed into her, knocking her off her feet. Striking the roof knocked her ANBU mask slightly askew, so she only got a glimpse of the blond-haired enemy's face before he exploded into a cloud of smoke.

An instant later, the wedge of nearly solid sound waves that passed through the kage bunshin slammed into the roof just past her head, sending fragments of clay tiles flying through the air.

Yugao rolled to her feet, blade up in a defensive posture, but found both of her opponents fully occupied by over a dozen clones each. The green-clad genin were displaying some impressive Taijutsu skills, each one dodging like crazy to avoid being disrupted. At first glance she had no idea which one was the real one, but she'd take any help she could get.

Bringing up her blade for a lunge, she closed in on the one who'd been faking before. He evidently saw her coming out of the corner of his eye, because he spun to avoid the attack, raising the shiny metal devices on his wrists…

Only to have two of the clones kick the backs of his knees, pitching him forward to be neatly impaled on her blade. He dropped to his knees, vomiting blood, and slowly toppled backward off her sword.

The other Sound ninja was taking a beating from the clones, but managed to dispel six of them. He didn't see Yugao's leaping strike before it was too late.

Turning to the clones, she took a deep breath. "Thanks, but who are you?"

Most of the clones were warily scanning the rooftops around them, but one in the middle folded his arms and announced, in a deep growling voice, "We are legion!"

The two clones nearest to the speaker both turned to look at him. He shrugged. The one on the left smacked the back of his head and he disappeared in a cloud of smoke. The one on the right just shook his head. "Sorry, ANBU-san. We're clones of Uzumaki Naruto. He assigned us to help you for as long as we last."

Yugao blinked. "You're all clones? Then where is he?"

"Chasing the Kazekage's children," the clone answered sourly.

---

The ANBU prowled around the edges of an elaborate chakra barrier that had been erected on top of one of the arena buildings. The Hokage and the man who'd been disguised as the Kazekage were both inside but they had no way through the deadly energy. The only success they'd experienced was when that odd wave of chakra had washed over the roof. The barrier had fluctuated for a moment, thinning out in some areas. A single hole large enough for a person had appeared, but only for a split second. Only one shinobi had been quick enough and near enough to exploit that weakness, one of Ibiki's chuunin wearing a proctor uniform.

Now the Hokage wasn't alone, but it wasn't enough. Especially since they could now see that his attacker was none other than Orochimaru, his former student. Some ANBU had already gone through the interior of the building, seeking to break through the roof from below. However, the barrier had reinforced the roof substrate with that same deadly energy, which had almost killed the first one to attempt a jutsu to breach it.

The ANBU stationed at the arena were left to prowl around the edge of the barrier like restless wolves, looking for any sign of weakness. The few enemies still within the arena were being dealt with by Konoha genin, chuunin, and a couple of jonin. To make things worse for the treacherous enemy, many visiting dignitaries had their own contingents of bodyguards. None of them were very happy about being put to sleep.

No, the Hokage's need was greater. He was fighting a deadly enemy and none of them could help. What use would a mere chuunin be in such a battle?

---

Things went fairly smoothly for Naruto and his friends until they entered the forest surrounding Konoha. They were barely past the walls before Hinata signaled they had pursuers. Shikamaru offered to hang back to delay them, but Naruto shook his head.

"Shino, can we afford a couple of minutes?" he asked.

Shino nodded. "We've been steadily gaining. They won't get out of my range that quickly."

After a quick whispered consultation, they dropped down to the forest floor, traveled a little further, and then took cover.

Naruto got a little worried when eight Oto-nins ran into the clearing, but Shikamaru managed to snag all of them with his shadow. It looked like Temari hadn't been the only one holding back earlier.

No sooner had they jerked to a halt than the kikai bugs Shino had spread in the branches above them descended like black ashes. Naruto smiled at the chagrined expressions he could see on what little of their faces was visible.

"Naruto! Above and right!" Hinata's voice snapped like a whip-crack. Her normal hesitancy and manners were nowhere to be found.

Naruto and his remaining clones were moving before what she'd said even registered. One of Shino's kamas deflected a thrown kunai right before it pierced Shikamaru's head, but a ninth Sound ninja was hurtling down out of the canopy behind it.

Two of Naruto's clones were dispelled in mid-air, not even slowing the man down. But they'd distracted him just enough for Naruto himself to get a clear shot. His leaping uppercut slammed into the

underside of the man's jaw before his feet even touched the ground. His head snapped back as his momentum reversed itself.

Naruto channeled his body's rotation into a spinning back kick that drove his heel into the ribcage of the already-rising shinobi. There were multiple cracks as the man catapulted backward. His flight was stopped by the tree trunk he impacted with a dull thud. He crumpled to the ground and did not move.

Naruto landed in a deep crouch, his feet kicking up dust as he finished his spinning motion. He wondered what Lee would think of his version of Konoha Senpuu. One glance at his target and he was pretty sure he wouldn't be moving any time soon. Looking back at the rest of the enemy, he saw that Shikamaru hadn't flinched or released any of his victims. Each of them had kikai bugs crawling across their heads and shoulders, and none of them could even move as long as they were held by Shikamaru's Kagemane no Jutsu.

Within thirty seconds of the start of the ambush, they were trembling. At forty-five seconds their eyes rolled back in their heads and they slumped in place. Shikamaru released his Shadow Bind and they collapsed bonelessly to the forest floor.

"They won't be capable of movement today without medical assistance," Shino said as he recalled his bugs. "But they may hold information valuable to Konoha. We should resume our pursuit."

Shikamaru shook his head when Hinata offered him the small packet of pills and canteen she fished out of her bag. He sighed as they took to the trees again. "That was less troublesome than it should have been," he muttered. "But now they will expect us to do things like this all the time and that is even more troublesome."

Naruto snorted. It was nice to see someone keeping their perspective on things.

The Sandaime paused to catch his breath. The black uniform he wore under his formal robes seemed to fit a little looser every day, but at least the metal arm guards and kabuto protecting his head were still secure.

He'd been able to stop the resurrection of his successor, but Orochimaru had still successfully summoned the first and second Hokages. But just as he had been about to insert the tagged kunai that would bind them to his service, the entire barrier rang like a great bell, going from dark purple to blood red for an instant.

In a flash, a blur he barely recognized as Ibiki's newest apprentice managed to breach the barrier. More importantly, his senbon ripped through the prepared tags dangling from the kunai in Orochimaru's hands. Sarutobi's most disappointing student was momentarily caught off guard, but the rage visible on his face when he realized what had happened was gratifying.

Sarutobi launched the jutsu he'd been building up the chakra for as the boy leaped clear. A grand fireball forced the Snake Sannin to leap back as well, but the motionless bodies burned to ash.

The old man turned to look at his former student. The second greatest regret of the Sandaime's life was allowing Orochimaru to flee Konoha when his crimes were exposed. Some part of him still remembered the boy he had trained, but it died a little more every time rumors of new atrocities reached his ears. The murder and impersonation of the Kazekage was merely the latest, and now he threatened the village Sarutobi loved.

"Stay clear of this," he murmured to Haku. A strange boy, but one he was glad he'd taken a chance on.

"I will not allow you to be harmed, Hokage-sama," Haku whispered. "Your life will not end before mine." The air chilled around the chuunin as the moisture within the air crystallized.

The Hokage shook his head at the boy's stubbornness. Some had questioned the wisdom of allowing Kakashi's prisoner a place within the Leaf, but his mercy was being repaid a thousand-fold today. However, he would not allow another person to die for Orochimaru's ambitions. He hefted his battle staff, the alternate form of his summons, Enma the Monkey King, and prepared himself.

---

Temari called for Kankuro to stop when Gaara grabbed her shoulder again. Worried that he was concussed worse than she thought, she carefully landed them both in the nearest clearing.

"Are you all right?" she asked in an urgent whisper.

"Get… get away…" Gaara murmured.

"What?" she asked. She wondered if it was already starting.

"Get away!" Gaara screamed, roughly shoving her aside. She stumbled back, almost dropping her fan. Then she noticed the shadows landing on the tree limbs overhead, almost obscured by the greenery.

"Mother wants blood," Gaara rasped, holding his head.

Temari edged away from the clearing, following Kankuro. Their original plan was to get far away as soon as Gaara started to use… it. Now she was not as assured of Gaara's invincibility. She shook her head when Kankuro tugged on her sleeve.

---

Naruto frowned as he watched Gaara's brother and sister move away from him. Even if they were enemies, it bothered him that they seemed ready to abandon him. He thought again about Hinata's guesses as to why Sabaku no Gaara was so bloodthirsty and shivered a little. To be totally alone, with absolutely no one precious to him?

It was with mixed feelings that he saw the fan and puppet users halt at the edge of the clearing. It might make it harder for his team to deal with Gaara, but watching them simply abandon him would be disgusting as well.

"You have betrayed your village's alliance with Konoha," Shino said, interrupting Naruto's thoughts. "Our assignment is to place you under arrest if possible, or terminate you otherwise. Immediate surrender is your most logical option."

Gaara screamed again, and Naruto suddenly realized why Temari and Kankuro had moved away from their brother. The sand from his seemingly inexhaustible gourd began to flow out, covering his body in a tan-colored mass that looked disturbingly like flesh, complete with weird blue markings.

Already one arm was completely covered with sand, forming a huge misshapen claw way out of proportion to the rest of Gaara's body. But instead of being unbalanced, he shot forward with surprising speed, smashing through the trunk of the tree they were standing on.

All four of them scattered, but Naruto leapt down into the clearing. Taking down Gaara was his job. His team would make sure the others didn't interfere.

---

Hinata felt her stomach twist as the air seemed to swell with unnatural chakra and insatiable bloodlust. Gaara was in the midst of some monstrous transformation, and she wasn't sure there was any way they could stop it.

Of course, that didn't keep Naruto-kun from trying.

Her own hesitancy vanished when she saw the Suna kunoichi angling to take a shot at her teammate with her enormous fan. She wasn't really equipped up for a mission, but she was far from helpless. No Hyuuga was ever truly unarmed. Temari leapt aside right before Hinata landed on her, chakra flaring from her hands.

"You will not harm Naruto-kun!" Hinata snapped in a voice she barely recognized.

The older blond girl's lip curled in annoyance. "Do you really think you can stop me?"

Hinata stared at her with her Byakugan, taking in every detail, every nuance of her foe's appearance. She wasn't as good at reading people as she should be, but she was pretty sure Temari was anxious about something – even more than would be normal for combat circumstances.

She thought of her father's voice when he was quietly angry with someone, the forbidding but restrained tone. When she spoke, she tried her best to assume that voice.

"Naruto will stop Gaara and I will stop you."

It was a pathetic attempt, really, but it still made the older girl flinch a little.

---

Kankuro wasn't quite as quick to move in, but neither Shino nor Shikamaru thought he'd abandon his team.

A multi-limbed apparition of wood and cloth descended from the trees, angling toward Naruto's back… right up until Shikamaru's shadow reached out and captured it.

"How long can you restrain his proxy?" Shino asked in a whisper.

Shikamaru didn't answer directly, but twitched three of his fingers together as sweat began to bead on his forehead.

A mass of Shino's bugs descended onto the wooden puppet, intent on rendering it down to sawdust. However, no sooner did they reach it than a small door opened in the side of its chest and dark purple mist spewed out, killing them almost instantly.

---

"Damn that is one ugly technique," Naruto said as he dodged Gaara's misshapen claw. It slammed down into the forest loam, compressing it nearly a foot.

If anything, Gaara moved faster, despite all the extra flesh, and it was spreading out over his body as well. Particularly disturbing was the portion starting to cover his face. One eye had been covered with something sporting a monstrous diamond-shaped pupil. That eye had locked onto him with an alien hunger Naruto could feel in the pit of his stomach.

Naruto put his hands together and began creating clones as quickly as he could, even as he leapt backward from another swipe.

---

*Growing old* , the Sandaime reflected, *is not an occupation for the weak.*

He struggled to regain his breath and glanced around. The canted roof of the arena building looked like a war zone. Craters had been blasted into the tiles, and fragments of scorched clay ground under their feet like gritty ashes. The barrier, however, was still completely unmarked.

His former student had planned well, intending their confrontation to occur in such an enclosure meant no one could intervene, as well as limiting his options to disengage. However, that also meant that Orochimaru was similarly limited, even if his arrogance blinded him to that fact.

Haku flitted around the periphery, never missing an opportunity to attack or distract Orochimaru. As a near miss made their enemy turn toward the boy, Sarutobi began another technique.

Haku barely managed to dodge the summoned snakes that shot out of Orochimaru's sleeves. But the distraction was sufficient to let the Sandaime complete his technique without hurrying too much, and

the blasted tiles surged upward into a wave that sped toward Orochimaru. Given a little extra time, Sarutobi could select his attacks with care, carefully managing his chakra reserves for maximum effect.

The fact that it seemed to infuriate Orochimaru suggested that rushing the old man had been part of his strategy. Foiling this tactic made his rage even more satisfying.

This Hokage had put up with enough nonsense.

Orochimaru started to counter the modified Doton jutsu, but hand seals are a little difficult to complete when you suddenly find senbon needles shooting toward your vital points. With a strangled cry, he threw himself to the side as the tiles exploded where he was standing. He fluidly rolled to his feet, holding his wrist. He yanked out the needle and shot a venomous glance at the Hokage.

"I see you still need a young boy to keep up with me," he snarled, his voice thick with insinuation. "I wonder what your lackeys think of you now?"

Whatever the years had stolen from the third Hokage's speed, young Haku more than made up for. The chuunin hadn't pressed the attack so far, more likely out of deference to his superior than any real fear, but Orochimaru seemed to find it increasingly difficult to complete the seals for his techniques. The confined nature of the conflict also limited his ability to complete a technique from cover.

But now, icy needles crystallized out of midair around the chuunin and shot toward the Sannin almost too fast to see. In a flash, he was riddled with senbon, falling to the ground with his breathing and heart stopped…

…only to dissolve into a mass of mud as the substitution technique expired.

Orochimaru emerged from a crater in the tiled roof behind them. With a growl of frustration he drew a straight-bladed sword from his own mouth and charged directly toward Haku. His speed was such that Sarutobi had to push himself to block the strike with his battle staff.

"That blade is poisoned," Enma growled, opening an eye between Sarutobi's hands. Orochimaru's swordsmanship was much better than Sarutobi remembered, but that was hardly surprising given the time that had passed.

The scowling Snake Sannin launched a combination of cuts that Sarutobi barely managed to block, though he was forced backward several steps. Haku circled warily, careful to stay out of the blade's reach. His hands blurred together in a series of seals, executed with speed that Sarutobi found surprising in someone so young.

With Enma helping, the Third blocked a wheel cut with enough force to stagger his foe, and then went on the offensive. Sarutobi ignored the chill in the air that made his facial skin tighten as his young ally formed a dome of ice mirrors around them.

A barrier within the barrier, and Orochimaru directly in the middle.

---

Naruto dodged another clumsy but terrifyingly fast lunge from Sabaku no Gaara as he distributed autonomous clones all around the clearing. They'd been useful against Orochimaru, so he hoped they'd work here as well.

Even as he prepared, more and more sand flowed over Gaara's body, further transforming him into something out of an expired milk nightmare. One great golden eye rolled crazily in the socket as the misshapen creature flailed around the clearing, smashing anything between it and Naruto. The blond couldn't help but stare as the monstrous form grew larger by the second.

For a moment, Naruto wondered if the missing-nins he'd killed had looked at him the same way.

He shook his head and leapt to the side as Hinata shouted a warning. There was enough danger here without distracting his friends by acting stupid. For a moment, he wondered how she knew which one was him. Then it hit him.

He was the only one making more clones. *Idiot.* The next batch all mimicked the seals the next time he did Kage Bunshin.

Gaara screamed his frustration in a voice loud enough to shake leaves from the trees. He swept his misshapen arm in a circle and the claw of sand detached, shooting out toward Hinata. The nearest clones were only beginning to react when she back-flipped out of the way, letting the sand smack harmlessly into the bole of a massive tree.

Naruto didn't even have to tell his clones to attack.

---

Hinata was growing increasingly frustrated with her opponent. Temari obviously had extensive training as a distance fighter, and used every bit of that training to maintain the distance between them. In a long-range fight, her Jyuuken was practically useless.

Of course, it wasn't all one-sided. Hinata's agility, honed by hours and hours of training, made it almost impossible for Temari to catch her with one of her wind blasts. Unlike her earlier battle with Tenten, now Temari was fighting in a heavily forested area and the Hyuuga always had cover available.

But Hinata was never so glad of her Hyuuga heritage when, right after shouting a warning to Naruto-kun, her eyes helped her track and avoid the sand Gaara had hurled at her. She swallowed heavily when she saw it smash the bark from the tree it struck.

"You kids are going to get killed if you stick around," Temari shouted at her. Hinata's ears weren't as well trained as her eyes, but, mixed in with the sincerity in the kunoichi's voice, she thought she detected undercurrents of fear and anxiety as well.

"I am a kunoichi of the Leaf," Hinata announced in a chilly formal tone. "My sensei has ordered my team to apprehend yours. We *will* succeed." She hoped the nearby clones were watching. She wouldn't let her team down again.

---

Shikamaru was mostly conserving his chakra. This was something he had a lot of practice doing. Sometimes he'd spend entire days just conserving his chakra.

But that didn't stop him from flicking out his shadow every so often to trip up that freaky puppet. After watching the damn thing spew out a cloud of poison gas, neither he nor Shino were eager to get too close to the thing. The Aburame was pretty adamant about shutting down the puppet master though.

He could have sworn the boy was looking to avenge his dead bugs, if the idea wasn't patently absurd.

Shino and the puppet were dancing around, leaping from branch to branch, in an exercise that looked far too troublesome for him to join. He knew without guessing that it was just a distraction while Shino's bugs closed in on the puppet master.

On the other hand, they'd also tipped their hand a little on the balcony. A wave of angry kikai bugs tended to make an impression on people. If Kankuro and Temari hadn't been obviously set to jump the instant that genjutsu swept the stadium, the bugs might have caught them before they cleared the railing and forestalled this whole troublesome mess.

Of course, watching Gaara continue to change out of the corner of his eye, Shikamaru wondered if chasing him out here might have

been less of a pain than dealing with him back in Konoha.

Despite just missing them, Shino's attack had obviously given Kankuro some warning of what to expect. The puppet user seemed to be moving around a lot himself. Maybe he was keeping an eye out for more bugs.

Shikamaru ducked as the puppet suddenly whirled away from Shino and launched a spring-propelled spike right at his head.

"Maybe I'd better pay more attention," Shikamaru said with a grunt as he edged away from the melee, looking for any sign of the puppet master.

How troublesome.

---

Clones poured out of the trees, swarming toward the steadily growing monster that was Sabaku no Gaara. The body of the Kazekage's son wasn't really visible within the huge mass of sand that was already as tall as the Hokage's tower, but that didn't stop the whole thing from flailing around like a wild animal, knocking down trees in an ever-widening radius.

Even weirder were the high-pitched cries echoing from within the mass of sand. The occasional yips didn't sound even remotely human, more like a raccoon or…

A tanuki. The damn thing looked more and more like one of those odd little raccoon-dogs.

It was so weird it was almost funny. But that didn't stop it from obliterating the first row of clones to reach it. Naruto ignored the memories of incredible pressure as they expired and circled around behind the monstrosity.

Eight kunai with explosive tags made a neat circle as they embedded in the behemoth's back.

The massive explosion when they triggered made the still-expanding sand tanuki stumble forward, but the crater left in the creature's back was already filling in before Naruto's eyes.

A tail almost as large as his apartment building swept out and crushed the trunk of the tree where Naruto was perched. The surprised Genin was pitched forward, along with several tons of tree. Some hastily created clones were able to hurl him free of the falling debris…

Right into the grasp of the sand demon's left forepaw.

---

Hinata screamed when she saw Naruto caught and crushed within Gaara's paw. From the way the clones had acted to save that particular one, she knew it was the real Naruto.

Temari obviously wasn't a kunoichi to ignore golden opportunities, because her wind blast caught the distracted Hyuuga and slammed her into a tree trunk.

Stunned by what she'd seen as much as by the impact, Hinata struggled to her hands and knees as the Sand girl moved in to finish her off.

---

A large hunk of wood slammed into the puppet, knocking it off balance and giving Shikamaru time to jump clear.

Shino dropped down from above, one of his kama held in both hands, poised to swing down and do as much damage as possible to the wooden puppet while it was off balance.

A spike emerged from the puppet's back, shooting out to impale the Aburame. Shino's kama fell from his suddenly lax fingers and stuck in the tree limb with a muted thump.

---

Naruto barely had time to take a breath before the paw closed. As the chakra-controlled sand of Gaara's new body flowed around him, a flash of inspiration struck.

As the pressure mounted with frightening speed, he frantically concentrated chakra into the center of his coils.

*Fox, if you don't want to die here today, you damn well better help!*

Kyuubi no Kitsune seemed awfully well informed to Naruto. Too knowledgeable by far to not be at least peripherally aware of what was going on around his prison. The surge of red chakra that slammed through his coils only confirmed this.

For an instant, his veins felt like they were full of molten steel. Naruto couldn't help but scream as he released the technique, even if sand did start to pour into his mouth.

---

Temari pulled out a kunai as the stunned kunoichi crawled around a tree in a pathetic attempt to avoid her fate. She didn't relish killing, but orders were orders, and her brother…

She shook her head and stepped around the trunk. The Hyuuga girl was still on all fours. For someone her teammates had defended so fiercely as not being weak, she sure hadn't shown much strength. She shook her head and steeled herself for what she had to do.

And then she heard the… thing her brother had turned into let out a shrill scream as its left arm exploded.

Temari's eyes widened as sand rained down all across the forest. The defeated Hyuuga at her feet disappeared in a puff of vapor and Hyuuga Hinata came charging down the tree trunk, her left hand spearing out in a Jyuuken strike.

---

Kankuro grinned under his face paint. One down and one to go. His fingers twitched and one of Karasu's segmented arms looped out, reaching for his other victim.

Then the impaled genin on Karasu's back, who looked like a fitting trophy, exploded into a mass of bugs that immediately began burrowing into Kankuro's pride and joy.

"What the hell?" he murmured. His eyes glanced back toward the kama stuck in the tree limb. It was still there. Did Aburames just turn into bugs when they died?

"An effective tactic to reinforce the illusion of the kikai bunshin," a voice proclaimed just as a blinding pain erupted in the side of Kankuro's head. It took an instant before he realized he'd just been clubbed in the head.

The Suna genin crumpled forward, allowing himself to fall off the limb where he'd been concealed. A twitch of his fingers in free-fall was enough to summon the heavily damaged Karasu to catch him.

At the moment, he wasn't capable of finer manipulations, so he sagged to the ground to play for time. "How did you find me? Even if they can smell me, I moved every time I saw your damn bugs get close."

"You are correct in that my allies can track you by scent," the creepy bastard said as he cautiously moved in. "However, the bugs within my body are more than capable of tracking that scent as well, and I can move somewhat faster when the situation calls for it."

The lazy bastard that fought Temari landed next to the creepy one and handed him the kama.

"Loaning a weapon to your bunshin was smart," Kankuro admitted as his vision began to clear. Creepy or not, that bastard hit harder than Temari at her time of the month. "When I saw it was solid, I thought I had you."

Kankuro blinked away the last of the double images. "Just like you think you have me," he said as he dropped the smoke bomb he'd palmed.

---

The Hokage ducked under a strike that would otherwise have decapitated him. He was starting to wonder if going hand to hand with his much younger student was such a good idea. He was off balance to parry Orochimaru's follow-up backhand cut, but a senbon needle forestalled the attack by protruding from the rogue ninja's elbow.

Haku was flashing from mirror to mirror faster than the eye could see, peppering Orochimaru with throwing needles every time he had a clear shot. It was a major distraction, and just enough to keep them on an even footing.

Even as Orochimaru yanked out the needle with a snarl, Sarutobi brought Enma's staff form around at knee level. The snake summoner, his attention momentarily on the supremely annoying chuunin, was an instant too slow dodging backward. With a crunch of bone, he was swept off his feet, sword flying into the air as he landed in a crumpled heap near the edge of the ice mirrors.

Sarutobi drew in a ragged breath as he looked around, wary for substitution techniques or other tricks. Orochimaru let out a low groan, but did nothing else.

Slowly the old man approached his former student.

---

Naruto spat out the sodden sand as he tumbled through the air. He hadn't expected that to work so well, but he guessed the way the sand wrapped around him magnified the effect of the pulse.

Opening his eyes to orient himself, he saw a flash of red atop the beige juggernaut. It was Gaara's hair. The upper half of his body was sticking out of the sand demon's forehead like some kind of reversed

pimple. He looked to be dead or asleep, but he was pretty sure Gaara being dead would kill the demon too.

So why was he asleep?

The rapidly approaching ground jolted him out of his thoughts. He quickly formed another batch of clones, finally beginning to feel a little drained after the countless hordes he'd created – not to mention two full strength chakra pulses. He wondered briefly if this was how everyone else felt all of the time.

' *Why does almost getting killed make me so thoughtful?'* Naruto wondered as a clone grabbed the sleeve of his jacket and hurled him toward another clone.

"Gaara!" a voice screamed from below.

Naruto's head pivoted even as another clone caught him and hurled him toward the others waiting on a tree trunk. The blond Suna kunoichi ran out into the clearing, ignoring the sand still raining down from the explosion. She stopped and swung her fan behind her, blasting a wind attack back the way she'd come. However, the technique came out very weak – one of her arms didn't seem to be working right and an entire section of her fan had the paper torn out.

Then he saw Hinata emerge from the trees, rolling to the side to avoid the attack. She was sweating and breathing heavily, but her eyes were hard as diamonds. Naruto didn't think he'd ever been so proud to be her teammate.

Naruto shook his head to clear it as he landed on the side of a tree-trunk, hanging there by the chakra in his hands and feet. With them fighting this close to Gaara… he needed to end this quickly.

Naruto ran down the bole of the ancient tree, letting gravity accelerate him even more. He saw Shino and Shikamaru chasing a battered wooden puppet out of the corner of his eye, but their presence here only hardened his resolve.

The sand demon's wails were trailing off, only to be replaced by shrieks of rage. Behind him, Naruto heard Temari shouting as some of his peripheral clones were drawn into the running battle between her and Hinata. The memories he received as they were dispersed made his stomach hurt. The anguish on the girl's face bothered him, but it wouldn't stop him from killing her brother.

---

Sarutobi stared down at the man who'd once been his hope for the future of Konoha. But that was a long time ago, and now he'd become more of a nightmare.

"Are you going to gloat now, old man?" Orochimaru demanded with a sibilant rasp.

The bones protruding from his shattered legs were a sickening sight, but a relief as well. He wasn't sure how much longer he could have kept up with him. "I take no pleasure in this," Sarutobi murmured as he hefted his staff. His former student appeared to have also suffered spinal damage from his landing. His left arm was outstretched at his side, only the fingertips twitching. For a moment he considered just taking him prisoner, but he ruthlessly crushed the thought. As long as that genius brain was alive, Orochimaru would be a deadly threat. He raised his battle staff. At least he could give his greatest failure a quick end.

An eye popped open on the staff between his hands. "Look out behind you!" Enma shouted.

Sarutobi spun. Orochimaru's sword wrenched itself free of the tiles where it had landed and hurtled through the air at him. His eyes barely had time to see this before the view was blocked.

Haku was now standing between him and poisoned blade.

---

When Naruto reached the forest floor, he switched to horizontal travel without slowing. Once he was no longer flirting with free-fall, a

quick thump to his weight releases sped him up until the greenery at the edges of his vision blurred.

He could feel his other chakra, still agitated from the chakra pulse, surging through his coils, seeking release. His fists trembled with a desire to punish Gaara, to beat him senseless for threatening his village, his friends.

The reddish tint sliding across his eyes, even as his sense of smell became even more acute, scared Naruto almost as badly as the monster in front of him. The demon inside him was something he could never escape. Gritting his teeth as he closed in on the screaming monster, he forced the red chakra down into his feet, away from his head.

Naruto could tell his prisoner didn't like that one bit, and the chakra surged even harder for a moment. But he had more important things to worry about, because he was now running up the side of the giant sand tanuki's ankle, using the extra chakra to maintain traction. The red chakra was actually helping, because he noticed that the sand seemed to absorb a lot more chakra than was normally required to maintain contact on a vertical surface.

He hoped he could move quickly enough to reach Gaara before the sand grabbed him. But as he ran up the demon's leg, he noticed that while the sand near him surged toward him, the stuff immediately around his feet stayed still.

Still, the sand farther away was reacting to his intrusion, rearing up and arcing forward to crush him like a bug. He poured on the speed as he climbed the bulging torso, past the arm that was still reforming even as it ponderously swung down at him.

Naruto changed direction with a sharpness only someone gluing themselves down with chakra could manage, angling toward the opposite shoulder. The whole world seemed to shudder as the demon's arm slammed into its own stomach, yards behind the charging genin.

Even as the demon yowled at ear-splitting volumes, Naruto saw the sand ahead of him rearing up like a wave. The sand tsunami crashed down across the monster's chest, but Naruto had changed directions again. He was breathing so hard he couldn't hear anything else, but he finally made it onto the demon's shoulder.

But the closer he came to the demon's head, the quicker it seemed to react. Sand began to spring up all around him in grasping tendrils, so he crouched down and leaped upward right before they smashed down on him.

Naruto's awkward and hasty jump got him clear of the trap, but now he was airborne and helpless. However, he was also very close to his objective. He arched his back as he carefully molded chakra. Slowly turning in the air, he got a very close look at a face several meters wide, complete with freaky diamond-pupiled eyes that were crossing trying to see him.

Then he was past them, drawing closer and closer to the forehead. Naruto completed the seals and then stuck out his arm and braced himself for impact.

"Raiton: Shokkingu Haji!"

---

Sarutobi was moving before what he saw fully registered. His left shoulder smashed into Haku's ribs, the unexpected blow shoving the young chuunin aside. But he was still in the way, and no time left to use his staff…

Moving with a precision he thought he'd lost a decade ago, the Sandaime Hokage brought his right arm up in a picture-perfect inside forearm block just as the sword reached him. Sparks flew from the metal bracer as the poisoned blade was diverted to the side. The metal was heavily scored, but the attack had missed.

"So noble, even to the end," a voice said behind him, dripping with scorn.

He spun to see Orochimaru standing behind him on two perfectly fine legs, swinging the sword he had just caught at the Hokage's head.

*Fooled by a simple henge* , he thought in disgust. With Enma in his left hand, there was no chance of bringing the staff around in time. He got his forearm up in time to block, but this time the blade bit into the damaged metal. He barely felt the cut as the blade pierced the sleeve of his uniform, but the burning agony as the poison seeped into his veins made him gasp.

"You're dead already, old man," Orochimaru sneered.

"No!" Haku snapped. The chuunin grabbed the Hokage's upper arm and the burning was replaced by numbness as the old man's entire arm was frozen solid. The ice encasing the bracer climbed up the sword and in a flash had enveloped Orochimaru's right hand. His left hand barely let go of the blade before it too was captured.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sarutobi could see the boy's face twisted into a rictus of hate. The ice around his arm advanced no further, but it moved steadily up Orochimaru's as he tried to pull free. Still, the Hokage's entire limb had been frozen solid, and the cold began to seep into the rest of his body, draining his flagging energy and making him very, very tired. "Haku?" he said.

The fury melted away from the boy's face. "I am sorry, Hokage-sama, but that is the only way I can think of to stop the poison," Haku said in a soft voice. "But the ice on *him* will advance until it stops his heart."

Orochimaru tugged harder, pulling both of them forward. Despite his frantic efforts, they were still joined together as the ice passed his elbow and moved toward his shoulder. "Let me go, you freak!" he hissed.

"For attacking my Hokage, you will die," Haku said, his soft voice as implacable as any Sarutobi could remember.

With a snarl of frustration, Orochimaru raised his free hand and smashed it down on his frozen forearm. It shattered into grisly chunks, as did the sword.

The snake summoner leapt back as the barrier suddenly flickered and died. Four shadowy figures leapt in from the corners as the ANBU just started moving. Haku moved to guard the Hokage, who was sinking to his knees and beginning to shake, but all four of them converged on Orochimaru. Sarutobi lost sight of them as the ANBU moved in.

He thought he saw them leap away with ANBU in pursuit, but his vision was getting cloudy. He blinked as one of the masked shinobi angrily demanded that Haku explain himself. "The arm was poisoned," the Hokage said in a shaky voice. "Orochimaru wouldn't use any venom that has an antidote." He coughed and shivered again. "It will have to come off."

The day seemed to be getting darker, but Sarutobi knew better. He hoped things were going better elsewhere in the village he loved.

---

If the situation wasn't so deadly, Naruto would have laughed out loud.

Sabaku no Gaara, demon container and terror of the sands, was now wide awake. To go with his wide eyes, his short red hair was now standing completely on end. It was even worse than Hinata's had been, that time they'd sparred.

Of course, Naruto had a clear view of this since one arm was wrapped tightly around Gaara's shoulders and the other was holding a kunai up to his right eyeball.

Despairing wails from the demon below them nearly shattered his eardrums, but they also told him that waking up Gaara had been a smart move. The mass of sand below them seemed to be softening,

losing cohesion, even as it reared up to crush the green-clad genin. His legs were already enveloped.

"Don't even think about it!" Naruto snapped. "Unless you think you can kill me before I push this through your eye. No sand there to stop it."

It was a calculated risk. He wasn't sure that even the threat of instant death would deter the crazy jinchuuriki. But the sand stopped rising – for the moment at least. He could also feel the mass below them trembling as the demon let out a mournful sigh… at a deafening volume.

What he wasn't prepared for was Gaara's dark-ringed eyes to focus past the kunai and lock onto his own. "Why haven't you killed me?" he asked in an eerily calm voice. "My existence has no meaning."

The utterly emotionless way the question was asked made Naruto's stomach turn over. He remembered Hinata wondering what it would be like if he'd been raised with no one who cared about him, no one precious to him.

If he'd been raised as a weapon, like it seems Gaara was.

For an instant, Naruto was struck by a thunderbolt of déjà vu. This… this was… not right. He remembered sitting by Hinata's bed at the hospital, hearing her describe her family. This was *wrong* and he had to fix it.

Somehow.

The sand was still losing cohesion, but Naruto was more concerned about Gaara. The empty teal eyes were looking past the kunai, focusing on him now. If he decided that Naruto lacked the will to kill him…

Naruto blinked as he received the memories of another clone. This one had been helping Hinata with the fan-user, Temari, the one

Sensei's dossier identified as Gaara's sister. His clone had been caught on the edge of a wind blast, but before he dispersed, he'd gotten a good look at the kunoichi. She was trying desperately to get past Hinata and into the clearing, even though she moved like she'd taken more than a couple of Jyuuken hits.

Even as he saw Gaara's eyes take on a calculating look, Naruto scowled and snapped "Idiot!"

Gaara blinked.

"You say your existence has no meaning?" Naruto snarled, "Then why the hell are your brother and sister trying so hard to save you?" The look on Gaara's face was so bewildered that Naruto felt a little sick inside… but he didn't let that show on his face. "Your sister can't even move one of her arms and she's still trying to get past my team mate." He grimaced. "She's crying and screaming *your* name, you idiot. And your brother is facing two to one odds as well. Maybe you don't think your existence has any meaning, but they sure as hell do. And they're going to get killed if we keep this up much longer."

The Suna genin, whose hair was finally returning to normal, leaned forward, totally ignoring Naruto's kunai. "She's crying?" he asked, his hollow voice a little less remote than before. "She never cries."

"Well she is now," Naruto snapped, pulling back the kunai before the oblivious demon-container hurt himself. "She obviously cares about what happens to you, even if you don't. Are you going to get her killed?"

Gaara's eyes focused again on Naruto's, with an intensity he found really creepy. "You won't hesitate to kill me, will you?"

"Not if it will keep my friends safe," Naruto replied, his voice cracking despite his best efforts.

"Then why did you stop just now?"

"Because…" Naruto's voice trailed off. "Because you're like me. Or what I'd be like if I didn't have my friends. One of them pointed that out to me. I had a chance to give you a choice, so I did."

Gaara stared at him for a long moment, and Naruto tightened his grip around the kunai. Then the Suna genin slowly nodded. The sand moved away from them both, releasing Naruto's legs, and slowly lowered them to the ground.

When they reached the ground, most of the sand dispersed while the rest moved to re-form the calabash on Gaara's back. Naruto warily released his hold on Gaara and pocketed his kunai.

The other battles around the clearing had slowly ground to a halt while this was happening, so it was mostly silent when Gaara raised his voice.

"Our mission is ended."

Author's Notes:

Dang that was hard to write. Interweaving multiple action sequences and not having them suck (and hopefully having all of them contribute to building the tension) was surprisingly challenging.

Before anyone else asks: Yes, the Hyuuga clan is a lot nastier than in canon. The reason is directly related to the AU divergence point, which as I have said, occurred well before the story begins. (Even before Naruto was born.) In fact, his behavior is a major clue that one reader has already used to figure out the plot. Complaining that you think Hiashi is out of character is like complaining that the story events haven't exactly mirrored canon. The exact sequence of events will eventually be revealed, but feel free to speculate on the Viridian Dreams forums.

Temari isn't a weakling, but she had an ideal matchup in the preliminaries, a real stroke of luck. She certainly didn't dominate her match against Shikamaru, and now she's facing someone who

doesn't like to fight at long range with easily deflected weapons, and in terrain that limits the effectiveness of her techniques. (And no, I don't think she has her summon yet, or she'd have used it against Sasuke in canon.) Hinata has also been through her own crucible of sorts, but this was only a preliminary test of her true mettle.

Why did Shino club Kankuro instead of slicing him up? Three reasons: Information in his head could be valuable, and with his kikai tearing up Karasu Kankuro is much less of a threat. Finally, he is a blood relative of Gaara, and holding him captive might give them some small leverage against the Tanuki version of Godzilla. Probably not as much leverage as Shino might hope, but he doesn't know quite how messed up Gaara's childhood really was.

No, this isn't Haku's first appearance in the story. Remember the chuunin that led Naruto to the bathroom? The one Sakura looked startled at? Yeah, that one.

Yes, Orochimaru's plan has kind of fallen to pieces… but in canon I found it to be rather overly-complicated and not failure insulated. Someone needs to remind that megalomaniac that no plan survives contact with the enemy. (And yes, I enjoyed chucking a couple of monkey wrenches into things.)

Regarding Shukaku's paw: Light a firecracker and let it go off on the open palm of your hand you will get a bruise and a minor burn. Let it go off inside a clenched fist and you will likely need help picking up your fingers. The chakra-enriched sand also mostly contained that pulse, so it didn't travel very far. Not that Naruto could see too much at the time…

Temari… there were hints of her concern for her brother in canon, but they were battling with fear of him and overconfidence in his abilities. As she said, seeing him get manhandled awoke her to the fact that he isn't invulnerable… which led to her reaction when it looked like Naruto was about to kill her brother.

A minor rant: Why do people ask me questions in unsigned reviews with no valid email address? Do they not really want an answer?

One thank you to my father, from whom I borrowed one of the Sandaime's pithier lines. I'm sure he'll recognize it when he sees it. He got me started on reading Heinlein at a very impressionable age, so most of what you read here is indirectly his fault anyway.

Happy Birthday, old man!

# A Fearful Fallout

Chapter 19

It was a very odd procession that slowly walked back to Konoha. The Sand team was battered and bruised. Naruto had clones carrying Kankuro's puppet as well as Temari's fan. As reluctant as they were to give up their weapons, they relented when Gaara spoke.

The Leaf shinobi were in better shape than their captives, but most of them had used up a great deal of chakra. Even Nara Shikamaru's slouch seemed more tired than usual.

Of the group, Uzumaki Naruto was the least exhausted, but even he was feeling a little drained. The seal containing his prisoner had given him a degree of unnatural stamina that most shinobi couldn't even contemplate without the aid of a lot of sake. He'd literally lost count of the number of times he'd used Kage Bunshin no Jutsu that day, the latest to form a cordon around both teams as they made their way back to Konoha.

Despite all the extra eyes, Naruto was still looking around cautiously. His teammates claimed they were all right, but they looked pretty wasted to him. All but Hinata had fought in the tournament earlier that day as well, and the glimpses he'd gotten of the Hyuuga girl's fight with Temari made him wince in recollection. Those two had gone after each other with a ferocity that shocked him just a little.

Naruto sort of understood Temari's attitude. She'd been worried about her brother. But as he sifted through the memories from his clones, he remembered Hinata practically *snarling* at Temari that she wouldn't let her harm *Naruto-kun.* Just thinking about that gave Naruto a very odd feeling.

Maybe some of his precious people considered him equally precious?

Even considering the possibility made Naruto's heart pound in his chest. But he had more immediate concerns at the moment. Gaara shuffled along like the rest, and just as silent. But every so often, he would glance at Naruto out of the corner of his eye. Every time he did this, Naruto expected him to say something, but he never did. Finally, Naruto turned his head so he caught Gaara looking right in his face. The red-haired boy actually jerked back a little. Naruto could see the others flinch in response.

"Is there something you'd like to ask me?" Naruto asked in what he privately called his "Kurenai voice". He hoped it sounded as patient as she was.

"How do you…" Gaara began, but his voice trailed off. "You have control of your demon. How did you do this?"

Naruto winced as Shikamaru let out a startled cough. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Shino grasp the shadow-user's elbow, his head leaning toward Shikamaru's ear. Naruto sighed. Pretty soon his prisoner would become the worst kept secret in Konoha. "I don't," Naruto said in a slightly irritated voice. "My seal may be a little different from yours, since I don't have any kind of automatic protection, but the only time it can try to influence me is when I am pretty mad."

Gaara nodded slowly, taking this in. "Yet you used its chakra several times today. I could feel it, especially when you escaped Shukaku's sand."

Naruto nodded. "We sort of have a deal. It knows that if I die, it dies too. I only ask when I really need it for something, and it knows that if it refuses it will probably die. It really doesn't want to die."

Gaara's eyes widened a little. "Then, I am in the same situation." He nodded slowly and resumed walking. After a moment, everyone staring at the jinchuuriki blinked and began walking as well.

As they walked, Naruto noticed Temari still held her right arm at a funny angle, moving it tentatively. Even if she'd kept her fan, he doubted she could have even carried it this far. He was hardly surprised, given how many times he'd been nailed by a Jyuuken strike. Shoulder tenketsu really sucked, because a hit to any of them tended to make the whole joint lock up. But Naruto was surprised when Hinata sidled up to the older blond girl and spoke with her in little more than a whisper. A moment later, she handed the Suna girl a small jar she'd taken from her pocket. Temari stared after the Hyuuga girl as she resumed her place in their formation, periodically activating her Byakugan to check for enemies.

Privately, Naruto was glad she hadn't changed too much.

It took them a little while to reach the gates of Konoha. They were halfway there when Naruto remembered the chakra-drained Sound-nins they'd left back in the forest. Fortunately, they weren't that far away, and he dispatched a platoon of clones to collect them. He was still a little annoyed with himself for not remembering earlier.

As he finished, Shikamaru fell into step with him. Naruto steeled himself for what was likely to happen next.

"Shino explained," the slouching genin said, staring up at the clouds overhead.

Naruto nodded.

"I think I understand how you've been slinging shadow clones around like cheap kunai. I asked Asuma about that technique and he said he wouldn't teach me until I had jonin-level chakra reserves, or else it might kill me." He sighed. "I suppose you might just be too stupid to know when you're supposed to collapse, but that's not why, is it?"

Naruto shook his head. Shikamaru was one of the few classmates he'd gotten along somewhat okay with, but now he sounded irritated.

"I suppose having a demon sealed inside you would boost your chakra a lot," Shikamaru continued. "It's annoying that I didn't figure it out sooner. I had all the pieces in front of me, too. Damn Aburame…" his voice trailed off and he shot a glare over at Shino… who seemed oblivious.

Naruto scowled. Hating *him* was okay, but Shino hadn't done anything but be smart.

"Anyway," Shikamaru continued, turning back to Naruto, "you're annoying as hell at times, but hating you for something like that is stupid *and* troublesome."

With that, the Nara boy slowed his pace a little, meandering toward the back of the group again, and leaving Naruto to continue beside the silent Gaara.

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As they approached the village, it was clear that the attack was over. The late afternoon air was oddly quiet without the sounds of distant explosions.

Their reception at the gates of Konoha had been a little hostile. Naruto supposed he couldn't blame them for being jumpy, but he didn't think anyone in Konoha would fail to recognize him, or fail to see Hinata's eyes. Then, as soon as the older chuunin acknowledged their forehead protectors were real, they demanded that they turn over their prisoners. Naruto clenched his fists as his temper began to fray. Maybe he'd been overexposed to Jiraiya, but he especially didn't like the way the younger guard was eyeing Temari.

"You two are really brave," Shikamaru announced with a yawn as he stretched. He grimaced as something in his neck made an audible pop. "I wouldn't have the guts to countermand a jonin's orders. I'm sure their sensei will be impressed by your initiative… right before she busts you back to genin."

After a whispered consultation, the gatekeepers decided to let them send one of their number ahead to fetch their sensei. However, they would be responsible if their prisoners tried to escape.

At that, Gaara looked up. "We have surrendered," he said in a flat, emotionless tone that still managed to sound annoyed.

At first, Hinata seemed like the logical person to find Kurenai-sensei as quickly as possible… until Shino cleared his throat.

Naruto stared at his teammate. "You tagged *Sensei* ?" he demanded, incredulous.

"I tag everyone," Shino answered, adjusting his sunglasses. "Therefore I already have a general idea of which direction to go."

"Shino would be faster," Hinata agreed.

As their teammate slipped through the gates, Kankuro coughed. "Tagged?" he asked. "As in, with *bugs* ?"

"Yeah, that's how we tracked you down," Naruto said absently. Then he snapped his mouth shut. Even if they were prisoners and that was fairly common knowledge about the Aburame, he needed to watch what he said.

Temari gave a whole-body shudder that made Naruto quickly look away. "I'd like to slap Father in the face for even *thinking* about attacking this place." She looked up just in time to catch Shikamaru staring. "What are you looking at?" she demanded.

"A prisoner I'm supposed to guard," Shikamaru said, just a little defensively, Naruto thought.

"That doesn't give you the right to ogle me," she snapped.

"If you'd rather take your chances with those two…" Shikamaru offered, nodding off to the side toward the chuunin manning the gate.

Temari tried to cross her arms and look away, but one of them still wouldn't move right.

"I – I think we should just wait for Sensei," Hinata offered.

"You better listen to her," Temari said in a spiteful tone. "She kicked my ass, she'd take you down in a heartbeat, pineapple-hair."

"Temari," Gaara said, and she immediately subsided, looking away. After a moment, she pulled Hinata's ointment from her sash and used her left hand to work some into her right shoulder under her uniform.

Kankuro edged toward where Naruto and Gaara were standing. "She gets like that when she's scared or upset. We're not going to violate our parole."

"Parole?" Naruto asked.

Kankuro peered at him, maybe wondering if Naruto was making fun of him. "Gaara surrendered to you. If we tried to escape now, we'd be violating his word and he'd probably have to kill or recapture us to regain his honor. Don't you do this in Fire country?"

Naruto shook his head. "Not that I've heard of. Maybe it's because you're the Kazekage's kids, so you're like royalty?"

Kankuro made a disgusted sound. "Hardly. The Daimyo of Wind Country hates the Kazekage. He's tried to ruin our village practically since his coronation."

Naruto was about to ask more about this when there was a commotion at the entrance. Shino and Kurenai came through the gate with a dozen ANBU, but following right on her heels was an old man with one arm, swathed in bandages, who was accompanied by unfamiliar men who looked like shinobi.

"I understand your concerns, Danzo-sama, but my team performed the capture, and they will be turned over to Ibiki to be *held* until the Hokage can make a decision." Kurenai spoke as she walked, but the clipped tones warned Naruto that she was about as angry as he'd ever seen her.

"The Hokage is still in the hospital, and it is questionable whether he will survive," the bandaged man said, and Naruto's heart seemed to freeze in his chest. "We *must* determine how deep this plot goes, and we must have this information immediately, no matter what steps must be taken."

*Hokage… hospital… questionable whether he will survive.* The words seemed to echo in Naruto's suddenly empty mind. He took half a step forward and his mind was no longer empty. It was filled with red flames. It was only as the red glare seemed to settle across his eyes and he saw Sabaku no Gaara flinch away that Naruto realized what was happening. He continued walking forward, forcing down the rage, rejecting the demon's gift of chakra, ignoring the chuunin and even a few of the ANBU as they stopped to stare at him. *Duty. Do your duty.* He reminded himself. *Don't embarrass Sensei. Don't embarrass your team.*

His voice was almost normal as he stopped several paces in front of the procession. "Uzumaki Naruto, reporting for duty, Sensei. We have apprehended the Suna team, who surrendered to us. We also neutralized a team of Sound shinobi that tried to intercept us. I have clones bringing them to this gate for processing."

"Very good, Naruto," Kurenai replied. She turned to the bandaged man. "I think that presents us with a compromise that won't violate orders. Danzo-sama, your men can process the Sound-nin team while we secure the Kazekage's children. We don't want to risk triggering a diplomatic incident before we have all the facts, do we?"

Danzo gave her a long, measuring look. "I see that Sarutobi's subordinates are just as wedded to his vision of the world. Very well, I will abide by his authority while he still lives. But keep in mind that

we have reports that one of his charity cases cost him his arm. Be careful you don't earn yourself a similar fate from your pet. Jonin of your skills are hard to come by."

Kurenai inclined her head politely, then gestured for her team to follow her. Naruto's clones picked up the fan and the puppet while the Suna genin shuffled over.

Once they were through the gate, Naruto noticed the signs of battle only hours past. There were scorch marks on walls, and the odd crater in the street. The memories of the clones that he'd left behind to help told him that no quarter of Konoha had been spared at least some damage. He decided to let his remaining clones keep an eye out while he asked the question burning in his mind. "Sensei," he whispered, "what happened to Hokage-sama?"

Kurenai sighed. "He was attacked by the Kazekage, who turned out to be Orochimaru in disguise. They were sealed behind a barrier no one could get through, except for one of the proctors. Both the Hokage and Orochimaru lost their right arms, and Orochimaru was forced to flee. Most of the fighting in Konoha stopped after that. There are indications that the Sand shinobi were deceived by Orochimaru."

"Our father is dead," Gaara said in a flat voice, making Naruto jump. His hearing was much better than Naruto had thought possible. His words also made his siblings jump, turning to him with wide eyes. "He would not have allowed himself to be replaced in such a manner if he was still alive. If Konoha was to be humbled, he would want to be there when it happened."

Both Kankuro and Temari looked shocked, but neither one disagreed.

"That is what most of the Suna jonin said when they surrendered after the barrier went down," Kurenai said. "But it will take some time to sort things out and let the Hokage come to a decision."

"So… he's going to be okay?" Naruto asked, hating the hopeful, wheedling tone in his voice.

"His arm was frozen to prevent poison from spreading through his body," Kurenai said, "but the medics have every confidence that he will fully recover."

Naruto let out a sigh of relief. Despite the signs of damage to his home, he knew everything would be all right.

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When they arrived at the detention center, Naruto had to bite back a laugh. The shinobi who'd conducted the written exam was also in charge of the ANBU Torture and Interrogation Force.

Figures.

A glance to the side showed a sour grimace on Shikamaru's face as well. Shino's expression, if any, was hidden behind that damn collar, and Hinata-chan was far too polite to say something. Unless she got mad, of course.

What was more interesting were the looks Ibiki exchanged with Kurenai-sensei. They seemed to know each other, though Naruto was having trouble guessing why Kurenai looked so amused and Ibiki looked like he'd drunk bad milk.

"I suppose I should have guessed your troublemakers would be out raising hell, Yuuhi," Ibiki growled.

Then Naruto remembered his brash words at the end of the written exam and swallowed. Oh well, at least Sensei didn't look angry. That had to count for something, right?

"They acquired some very high profile prisoners, Ibiki-san," Kurenai said with a slight smile. Then her face turned serious. "The Hokage will want them handled very carefully. Danzo-sama has already expressed an interest in them."

Ibiki frowned, pulling tight the cloth he wore tied across his ruined scalp. Naruto hoped it didn't pop loose – seeing that once was enough. "Who the hell did they bag?"

"I am Sabaku no Gaara," Gaara said tonelessly, accompanying his words with a formal bow. "I have given parole, along with my sister and brother," he added in that affectless voice that still gave Naruto chills. He hoped Gaara didn't forget what they'd talked about in the forest.

Ibiki only blinked once. "That explains a lot. I have a place we can keep them until the Hokage can make a decision."

"Will they be allowed visitors?" Naruto blurted out before he completely thought it through.

"Not normally," Ibiki replied, his eyes narrowing as he turned toward Naruto. "Why do you ask?"

"Er, it might be important," Naruto replied evasively. "For reasons I cannot discuss. I also think Jiraiya should see him as well." Naruto floundered for a moment. "For safety reasons," he added lamely.

Ibiki turned to Kurenai, but Naruto's sensei was staring at him curiously. "Does this have something to do with the Hokage's special law?" she asked.

Naruto nodded quickly.

"How urgent is it that Jiraiya come here?" she asked.

"Very urgent," Naruto replied. "Something might need to be fixed, and it might be a good idea for me to check on it until he's had a look."

Kurenai's eyes flicked over the prisoners, and then she turned to Ibiki and nodded. He raised an eyebrow, but nodded back. Naruto thought it was interesting that the special jonin was evidently willing

to accept Kurenai's assessment over his own opinions. "All right," he finally said. "I can arrange visiting hours once a day. Noon?"

Naruto nodded gratefully, and then turned to Gaara who had witnessed the whole conversation silently. "I'll bring you guys lunch or something."

Temari and Kankuro just looked confused. Very, very confused.

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"This convenes an emergency session of the village council for Konohagakure," Homaru announced in a dry, but steady voice.

"Is this even proper?" a voice asked uncertainly. "I mean, we barely have a quorum here."

Hyuuga Hiashi quickly rose to his feet, directing a glare at the questioner. The silk merchant flinched visibly. Though prosperous, a good portion of his income flowed from Hyuuga coffers and he knew it. "The treacherous attack on our village requires swift action if we are to properly discharge our responsibilities to Konoha," he said in a chilly voice – clearly daring anyone there to disagree.

"That is correct, Hiashi-sama," echoed Maniki Gowabara, the head of the ancient Moneychangers Guild. In modern times, they controlled all of the village's banks, including the large cash reserves that served as a foundation for Konoha's economy, as well as guaranteeing the village's credit.

"What is our first order of business then?" asked Yoshikawa Toshiro. He owned a large chain of retail shops scattered throughout Konoha. Directly and indirectly, his businesses supplied most of the equipment used by ANBU and the other shinobi.

"The first is to declare the Chuunin Examination cancelled," rasped Danzo. "I've always counseled that inviting foreign shinobi into the heart of our village was a mistake, despite what *some* may claim.

We no longer have time to deal with this misguided policy when Konoha itself is in danger."

"This will anger some of the clans," Mochizuki Hiro, the representative of the agricultural guilds, observed. He gestured toward the empty chairs normally occupied by representatives of the more prominent Ninja clans, including the Aburame and the Nara.

"They will have the opportunity to test again in six months," Hyuuga Hiashi countered smoothly. "Or whenever the new Hokage decides to resume them. We will vote by a show of hands. All in favor raise your right hands."

The vote was quickly taken. Secret ballots were normally reserved only for the most sensitive of decisions. In this case, the abbreviated council was unanimous in their decision.

"The motion passes," Hiashi announced. "The chuunin examination is canceled and will be reconvened only at the Hokage's order." He nodded toward the door and a Hyuuga Branch Family chuunin left to post the council's decree.

"Which brings us to our next item of business," Danzo added. "With Sarutobi incapacitated by his former student's attack, we find ourselves leaderless. I-"

"I'm sure you are willing to do whatever it takes, Danzo," a gravelly voice said from the entrance to the council chamber. "Fortunately, such steps will not be necessary."

The bandaged face of the Root leader showed almost no reaction as he turned, but the minute widening of his visible eye spoke volumes to those that knew him. "There were reports that you were on your deathbed," the one-armed man said. His tone implied he wasn't too thrilled to find them to be false.

"Reports of my death were exaggerated," the Sandaime said as he slowly walked into the chamber. "The medics were able to save my

life, if not my arm." He was trailed by a blank-faced medic-nin and one of the chuunin proctors from the exam. Those two were flanked by a small group of chuunin, including the pair that normally guarded the doors to his office.

"I see," Hiashi said coolly. "Then I must congratulate you on your survival. However, it is clear that you are no longer capable of fulfilling some of the more strenuous duties required by your office."

The silence that followed that statement was absolute. Hyuuga Hiashi wasn't *quite* challenging the Hokage – but only by the barest of margins. Several of the council members shivered slightly. The room seemed to have grown quite chilly in the last few moments.

"You are quite right," the Sandaime said, breaking the silence. He smiled slightly. "I will be making arrangements to have my chosen successor brought here soon. In the meantime, I know all of you must be worried about your homes and families. I appreciate your dedication in making sure Konoha isn't left leaderless in the face of this crisis, but as I am no longer incapacitated it is no longer necessary for you to exercise your emergency powers."

It wasn't *quite* a dismissal, but the Hokage's tone was clear.

"In that case, we will adjourn," Hiashi said. The cold smile he wore as he stepped away from the podium was only marginally short of offensive.

Sarutobi's eyes lingered on each of the council members as they left. Many of them refused to meet his eyes, looking down as they quickened their steps. Danzo was the last to leave, and he met the Hokage's gaze squarely.

"This isn't over," Danzo said. His eyes lingered on the empty sleeve of the Hokage's robes.

"No, it isn't," Sarutobi agreed.

After the Root leader shuffled out and the door closed, the Hokage suddenly sagged, and might have fallen if Haku hadn't appeared at his remaining elbow to steady him.

"Hokage-sama, I told you this was ill-advised," the dark-haired medic-nin fretted as he ran a glowing hand across the chest of the old man's robes of office. "You have not fully recovered from your hypothermia." The last he said with a sympathetic glance toward the chuunin, who nonetheless winced.

Sarutobi coughed once before he sat down in one of the recently vacated chairs.

"I agree, but it was still necessary. If I had stayed under your care at the hospital, there is no telling what mischief they would have gotten up to." He sighed. "As it was, we didn't get here in time to stop their first decree."

"Surely canceling the examination was justified under the circumstances, Hokage-sama," one of the chuunin guards exclaimed.

"Perhaps," Sarutobi said, "but I think I saw enough in the time I did have to make some recommendations to the proctors." He sighed. There would still be some questions as to the validity of the tests, since some participants were clearly not there for honest competition. "Nothing to be done about it now." This was not a fight he could afford, not with everything else happening.

His lips pressed together in a thin line as he levered himself to his feet. Lingering here too long would reveal too much to his enemies. For a brief moment, he wished Konoha was more like other villages, where a Kage's word was absolute and he could overturn even the most lawful exercise of power by the council when it suited him. He shook his head. That wasn't what he and the others had fought so long for.

In the aftermath of the attack, the genin teams were mobilized en masse to assist with the cleanup. It felt very strange to Naruto to not be on the intensive training schedule he'd followed prior to the finals of the Chuunin Exam. Instead, Kurenai-sensei met them first thing in the morning with a long list of assigned tasks. Normal mission pay was reduced in light of the crisis, but no one even thought of complaining.

Team Eight spent most of their days on street repairs, patching up battle-damaged walls, and doing their best to eradicate any signs of the invasion. The work seemed to be endless, but Naruto found that he didn't really mind. It felt good to have something concrete he could do to make things better.

He was a little disappointed when he received word of the examination being cancelled, but in light of everything that happened, he couldn't really complain. Konoha recovering from the invasion had to have the highest priority. Kurenai-sensei emphasized that when she told them the news and Naruto supposed that only made sense.

An unworthy part of his soul was a little disappointed – he thought he'd made a good enough showing that they could have passed him if they wanted to. On the other hand, if he participated in another exam, he'd have a chance to fight in front of the crowd again. At least, he would if it was held in Konoha. He'd never forget what it felt like to have all those people cheering him like that.

Even if he wanted to whine, any urges to do so would have fled the instant he saw the Old Man at the Hokage's tower after their fifth day of repair work.

They had finished early that day, having completed more missions than Kurenai-sensei had expected. Naruto had been feeling restless with the lack of training, and their tasks that day were mainly ones that benefited from throwing dozens of kage bunshin at them. Filling in fifteen potholes at once had really sped things up.

Seeing the Hokage with those deep lines etched on his face and an empty sleeve really drove it home for Naruto. He tried to speak, but no words would come out.

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The Sandaime looked up wearily from his paperwork. He smiled a little when he saw Team Eight, but it was a weary expression that sat heavily on his face. He'd been too slow to prevent the council from cheating the boy out of his rightful promotion. There was little doubt in his mind that Uzumaki Naruto was ready for chuunin rank. The skills he'd displayed in the arena showed a remarkable degree of growth. Part of him was annoyed that he'd never pressed Yuuhi Kurenai to join the Ninja Academy as a chuunin, but part of him was equally happy that she'd been available when Naruto really needed a skilled mentor.

The only mark against the boy was the conclusion of his first match, and given the lethal techniques the Hyuuga boy had attempted, he could hardly hold that against him. He knew full well why the match had been so vicious, but he could hardly meddle in clan affairs and maintain his neutrality as the Hokage for the entire village. That was why he was equally glad to see young Hyuuga Hinata returned to semi-active status for D-rank missions. If her sensei felt she needed to supervise the last stages of her physical therapy, who was he to disagree?

Still, the cancellation of the exams felt like yet another failure on his part to look out for the boy. Kurenai's reports regarding how badly he was treated by certain villagers had left a worm of guilt gnawing at the pit of his stomach. His actions, or rather *inactions* , had given the boy more than enough reason to hate him by now. Still, he had to face up to the consequences. That was one of the first lessons he'd learned from his predecessors.

Naruto froze in place for a long moment in the doorway to his office, and the Hokage steeled himself for bitter recriminations. Then the doorway was empty and the boy was standing beside his desk. Gods, but he'd gotten fast. Haku's fist was drawn back with senbon

glittering between the fingers before he saw the Hokage's hand sign to stand down. Naruto's arms were wrapped around his ribs in a hug that made them creak.

The Sandaime remembered consoling a young Maito Gai after his sensei had been killed on a mission. The boy's strength was at least comparable, and he quickly patted Naruto on the shoulder to console him. Overwhelming emotion could make a taijutsu powerhouse forget their own strength, and the last thing he needed now was broken ribs.

Still, when the boy raised his tear-streaked face, the Hokage felt better… lighter… than he had in weeks. Naruto clearly forgave him his failures. Perhaps he could come to forgive himself.

He looked over at Jiraiya, who was lounging next to the door. He hoped he was doing the right thing.

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Naruto straightened up and sniffed, a little embarrassed by his impulsive outburst. But seeing the Old Man looking so… old… just tore through him like a kunai. He was even missing an arm like everyone said, and he was still here doing Hokage things like paperwork and mission briefings.

Kurenai-sensei had talked to him a few times about what being the Hokage really meant. She wasn't so much trying to talk him out of it, he realized after a while, but she wanted him to realize exactly what he was letting himself in for. But nothing underlined her lessons quite so well as seeing the old man sitting at his desk, doing paperwork a little awkwardly with his left hand.

The Old Man gave Naruto a kindly smile as he scuttled back to his team, and some of the deeper creases in his face seemed to lighten. He should smile more often, Naruto decided. As he got back in line, avoiding Kurenai-sensei's eyes, he noticed a new chuunin standing in the back corner of the room. She was pretty, with long, dark hair, and she looked vaguely familiar to Naruto as she tucked something

into her sleeve. Then he remembered the proctor at the written exam that had escorted him to the bathroom. He hoped she wasn't mad about his little trick. He shrugged. She shouldn't have followed him into the bathroom in the first place.

Naruto was also a little surprised to see the Old Pervert leaning against the wall next to the door. He still gave the man a silent, but respectful, nod. 'Literature' aside, Naruto admitted his lecherous ninjutsu teacher had shown his serious side during the invasion. According to rumor, he'd killed hundreds of Sound and Sand troops that were attacking the walls. Naruto overheard a bandaged chuunin claim that the survivors would never be able to look at a toad without screaming in terror. Naruto thought he might have been exaggerating, but then again, he never wanted to get on the wrong side of Gamabunta-sama, so maybe it was true.

Jiraiya had also done Naruto a personal favor and looked at Gaara's seal. It actually hadn't taken that much persuasion, once Naruto explained that he didn't think the seal was functioning correctly. The only things the Toad Hermit took as seriously as chasing women were jutsu and sealing techniques. The next day when he and some clones were bringing ramen to the holding cells, he saw Gaara sleeping so deeply that he could not be roused. His siblings were petrified, convinced he'd been poisoned or that Shukaku was busy consuming Gaara's soul. Naruto finally had to tell them, in low tones, that the crazy old man who'd examined Gaara had taught the one who made Naruto's own seal.

The next day, Gaara was awake, but drowsy. He seemed very… odd. Quiet and remote, but every so often he'd focus his attention so fiercely on what someone was saying that it was like a physical force. He did this most often with Naruto when he was there – much to the relief of his siblings. When Naruto got up to leave, Gaara asked him to thank Jiraiya-sama. Naruto quietly promised to do so, ignoring how shocked Temari was at her brother's humble tone.

Jiraiya had been unusually pensive when Naruto's clone tracked him down to pass on the message. "Remember this when someone asks

you why you serve Konoha," was all the old pervert would say before dispelling the clone.

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Kurenai thought she'd broken the news about the Hokage's condition as gently as she could, given the circumstances. But Naruto's reaction when they entered the office only showed that it hadn't fully sunk in yet. But after seeing the Hokage's reaction, she couldn't bring herself to chastise her student for his lapse in decorum. She reminded herself that the two of them had a relationship that far predated her taking Naruto on as a student. Something seemed to pass between the two of them, and some of the jagged tension seemed to drain out of her Hokage. Maybe the Sandaime had really needed that hug.

And maybe Uzumaki Naruto was just a little more perceptive than she gave him credit for.

"We have completed our assigned tasks, Hokage-sama," she said with a hint of pride. Her genin had worked especially hard that day, and they deserved to know that she was proud of them.

"Good, good," the Hokage said, fumbling with his pipe. He sighed and tapped out the ashes and set it down. "I was about to send a runner out to find you, so this is fortuitous." He leaned back in his chair a little. "I've asked Jiraiya to locate my successor and bring them back to Konoha, and he's asked for a genin to assist with locating her."

"Your clones should make it a lot easier to find her, boy," Jiraiya added casually. The Hokage leaned back in his chair and smiled, a trifle grimly. There was also the added benefit of getting Naruto out of the village while they investigated the death threats Umino Iruka had reported overhearing during the examination. They might have just been idle talk, but the people present were rich and powerful enough to take it seriously – especially during a transition of leadership when all manner of folly might be attempted.

Naruto brightened a little with excitement, but subsided almost as quickly, shooting troubled glances at his teammates. The Sandaime nodded to himself. It spoke volumes about the boy's character that he immediately thought of his teammates, but future missions wouldn't always be with the same comrades every time.

"Very well, Hokage-sama," Kurenai injected crisply. "Team Eight will continue with reconstruction and repair missions, though I'm not sure we will be able to handle as many per day."

Naruto straightened up immediately, the Hokage noted with an inner smile. "That is understood, we will adjust the assignments accordingly," he said. He suspected they'd been using large numbers of Naruto's clones as brute force labor. Team Eight was completing more tasks per day than any other genin or chuunin formation in Konoha, something he'd been pleased to point out to a number of people who had grumbled about their task assignments.

Then the Hokage glanced down at the formal scroll sitting on the corner of his desk. He'd left it there as a reminder of a less pleasant matter. With the fallout from the examination and Hyuuga Neji, he could only push Hiashi so far on this matter. "One other item has come up. Is Hyuuga Hinata recovered sufficiently to return to full active status? I've had an inquiry from her family."

Kurenai stiffened a little. She knew the Hokage had seen through her little subterfuge, but she thought he'd quietly approved of keeping Hinata away from her father a little longer. Undoing years of abuse was impossible in such a short time, but just staying in a supportive environment was having positive effects on her emotional equilibrium. And from the way her student's shoulders were drawing in, the prospect of returning to her clan was not a welcome one. But she could not lie to her Hokage. "She is… mostly recovered, Hokage-sama."

"I see," the Hokage said quietly. "If she has finished with her therapy regimen, then she should probably return to her home."

Naruto glanced at Hinata out of the corner of his eye, trying for once not to be completely obvious. His teammate did not say a word, but her face bore the pinched, closed-in expression she'd donned in the hospital when he'd persuaded her to tell him about the Hyuugas.

Naruto turned to look at Jiraiya. The old lecher's face bore an unusually grim expression. Something was up with this retrieval mission, but he wasn't about to tell him anything here. Naruto quickly weighed the pros and cons. If it was too dangerous, they'd veto what he was about to propose. But if he wasn't around, he couldn't really look after his friend. Shino would do his best, no doubt of that, but it wasn't quite the same. He had to at least try.

"Er, if we need to find someone, wouldn't it be good to have Hinata's Byakugan along?" Naruto asked, swallowing when he noticed all the adults looking at him. "She's a lot more, uh, observant than I am," he finished lamely.

The Hokage, Jiraiya, and Kurenai-sensei all exchanged glances, but Naruto had no idea what unspoken conversation was taking place.

"That's not a bad point, boy," Jiraiya grunted after a moment. "Even if it is an excuse to bring your-"

"I agree," Kurenai added sharply, cutting the old hermit off, much to Naruto's relief. "For this type of reconnaissance mission, having Hinata present would definitely speed things up, and bring all of you back to Konoha faster." She turned to Shino with an apologetic glance.

"If I have never had an opportunity to tag the objective," Shino noted, "my presence would not make a noticeable difference in achieving the mission objectives. Logically, I should remain here with Kurenai-sensei."

Kurenai gave Shino an approving nod and turned back to the Hokage. "The addition of Hyuuga Hinata to the special mission would seem to make sense, Hokage-sama."

The Sandaime nodded after a moment. "Duly noted. I will inform her father that she has the honor of being selected to help retrieve the Godaime Hokage."

Naruto resisted the urge to cheer. Seeing Hinata's face out of the corner of his eye, watching it relax as a small smile formed on her lips, made it even harder.

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Kurenai dismissed her team for the rest of the day. Naruto and Hinata would need a little time to prepare to leave in the morning. Shino, on the other hand, would assist his parents in repairing some damage to the Aburame compound.

As soon as the genin filed out of the Hokage's office, she turned toward the two older men. "With your permission, Hokage-sama, I would like a few moments to brief Jiraiya-sama with respect to my genin."

The Sandaime's lips twitched minutely around his pipe, but he just nodded.

Jiraiya had a ridiculous grin on his face as he followed her to an unused conference room. He spoke up as soon as the door closed behind them. "Well, I didn't think this would happen so quickly, seeing as how we really got off on the wrong foot, but I-"

"Jiraiya-sama," Kurenai replied crisply. "I know you cannot possibly be as large a fool as your public persona acts. Please do us both a favor and drop the act for the next ten minutes. Neither of us really has the time to waste on idle posturing."

Jiraiya blinked once, and then his eyes hardened. "Very well, Jonin. What did you wish to discuss?"

"Naruto. And your behavior towards him."

Jiraiya crossed his arms. "Go on," he said.

"Uzumaki Naruto has no primary male role model at this point in his life. The Hokage has behaved in a grandfatherly role in the past, but his duties make him too remote, and now that Naruto is a genin, the differences in rank are coming between them. Umino Iruka is a good man, but his contact with Naruto has lessened considerably since he left the Academy. Maito Gai…" She broke off and shuddered.

Jiraiya grimaced and nodded.

"Gai is a good example of hard work and discipline, but even Naruto is aware of his eccentricities and… social shortcomings. You, on the other hand, are a well-respected Shinobi with a legendary reputation. You are highly knowledgeable in ninjutsu, an aspect of shinobi training in which Naruto has the capacity to excel. You also aren't infected with the idiocy that made many in this village treat the boy as a pariah." Kurenai's voice trailed off.

"But?" Jiraiya prodded her, his voice flat.

Kurenai's voice was even as she continued, with no hint of anger leaking out. "But in many ways your behavior is even more deplorable than Gai's. Like it or not, that young man looks up to you, and will likely do so more as time passes and you continue to work together. He's had nothing but positive things to say about the things you've taught him, and that advanced doton jutsu probably saved his life. But I'm concerned about what he might learn from you besides jutsu."

Jiraiya's scowl deepened, drawing his eyebrows together. "Don't you think you're overreacting?"

"No," Kurenai said softly, "I am not. There are things that might be acceptable for you that are not acceptable coming from Uzumaki Naruto."

"If you think polite behavior is going to make people stop hating him for the Kyuubi, you're a fool," Jiraiya scoffed.

Kurenai shook her head. "I'm not talking about acceptable for Naruto the Jinchuuriki, I'm talking about Naruto the Hokage."

Jiraiya stared at her. "You really believe his boasting about becoming Hokage?"

Kurenai shrugged, something she hadn't done in a long time. It was odd. When Jiraiya acted seriously, he reminded her of her old sensei. "At first, I wasn't sure. It was his overriding goal when he left the Academy, so I decided to take it seriously and phrase everything he needed to do to improve in terms of how it would advance him toward that goal. Even if he changed his mind later, he'd still be a better shinobi for it." She shook her head. "But he's worked at a pace that I find almost frightening. He's improved so much in such a short time, and now his goal doesn't seem so far-fetched. If you had any idea what a mess he was at the Academy…"

"I know exactly how bad he was," Jiraiya said with a growl. "The old man didn't take me too seriously when I said something was going on there."

Kurenai looked up, her eyes glinting. "How did you know?"

"I checked up on him, secretly, whenever I returned to Konoha to report to the Hokage," Jiraiya said. Then he added, "He is my godson, after all."

The Sannin winced a little at the spike of killing intent that tore through the room.

"You are his godfather," Kurenai said, taking a step toward him, "and you left him to be raised like this? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"He's alive," Jiraiya replied coolly. "He probably wouldn't be if I'd claimed him. I have too many enemies and so did his father." He spat to one side, knocking over a wastepaper basket. "I'm not happy about how things turned out, but it could have been a lot worse. I've also spent damn near every day of the last ten years working to

protect my godson. Ask the Hokage about an organization called Akatsuki, you should be cleared for it, given your relationship to Naruto. And while you're at it, ask him how many times he's talked me out of eliminating half the Council." With that, Jiraiya turned and angrily stalked toward the door.

"Wait!" Kurenai's voice stopped him as he was reaching toward the doorknob. "His father? Gods… The Fourth really did have a son, didn't he?"

Jiraiya turned back toward her with a grimace. "Me and my big mouth," he sighed. "Congratulations," he growled, "you've stumbled across another S-class secret. If this gets out, half the hidden villages will be sending assassination teams within the week. But you won't have to worry about that because I'll kill you myself."

"It won't get out because of me," Kurenai snapped back. "But if the resemblance gets any stronger, people will start to assume things like that Iwa border patrol."

Jiraiya shook his head. "I suppose you're right about that. All we can do is really just buy him as much time as we can before things come to a head."

"At the rate he's improving," Kurenai observed, "I think he's got a good chance."

"Maybe," Jiraiya grunted sourly.

"Which brings me back to my original point," Kurenai continued. "I don't think it's going to help Naruto as a Hokage if he has a reputation as a pervert. All right, I can understand in your case why it might make an acceptable cover, but for such a… why are you laughing?" she demanded.

Jiraiya was actually doubled over, holding his stomach. With a mighty effort, he stifled his laughter, save for an occasional chortle,

and straightened up, wiping the tears from his eyes. "I'm sorry, but that's the funniest thing I've heard all day."

"I don't see what's so funny," Kurenai said.

"Every time I publish a new masterpiece of adult entertainment," he explained, his grin widening with every word, "I reserve the first thirty copies to be shipped back to old friends in Konoha. Number one is always personally signed, with a dedication to my old sensei."

Kurenai hung her head, pinching the bridge of her nose as she struggled to rid her mind of the image of Hokage-sama reading an orange book and giggling like Kakashi. She failed miserably. Being a genjutsu master required a vivid and detailed imagination. Times like this made her wonder why she hadn't become a seamstress like her mother wanted.

Kurenai sighed. She wondered if the breakroom had any coffee left. Maybe some aspirin. "All right, let me rephrase. I think it would be a liability for a Hokage to be *publicly* known as a pervert. There are already stories going around about some strange sex-change jutsu he developed at the Academy, but I think those will just be treated as youthful pranks. Naruto's already going to face an uphill challenge getting most of Konoha to accept him. Do you want to make it even harder for him?"

Jiraiya sighed. "All right, you've made your point. I'll… keep a handle on my cover activities when he's around. All right?"

Kurenai nodded. "Thank you. The only other thing I wanted to discuss was his friends."

"Look, I agreed to take an extra genin so he won't feel too lonely. I don't see what the problem is."

Kurenai paused for a moment to collect her thoughts. "I'm going to bend on a few personal confidences here. This information is for your ears only, understood?"

Jiraiya nodded, rolling his eyes.

"Hyuuga Hinata is the oldest daughter of the clan head, but I doubt she will ever be confirmed as heir. She's been subjected to systematic emotional abuse for most of her life, punctuated by what seems to be plausibly-disguised episodes of physical abuse. I've considered removing her from active duty, but missions appear to be her only escape from an abusive environment. Confined to the Hyuuga compound, I'd give her less than a year before 'accidentally dying' – either by her own hand or someone else's."

Jiraiya's eyes hardened as she spoke.

"I'd also estimate a greater than even chance of Naruto, and possibly Shino, engaging in unauthorized retaliation were that to happen, no matter the consequences."

Jiraiya's eyes widened. "It's that serious?"

"It can be," Kurenai replied. "If you checked up on Naruto, then you know he's had no friends his own age up until now. Imagine how close he's become to his teammates – his first friends?"

Jiraiya closed his eyes for a moment, and Kurenai winced. The breakup of the Densetsu no Sannin was well known, but she hadn't intended to open old wounds. "To their credit," Kurenai continued after a moment, "his teammates appear to be just as loyal. Shino confronted his clan elders regarding slanderous rumors spread about Naruto, even threatening to leave the clan if what I heard was true."

Jiraiya's eyebrows went up at that.

"After his first kill, Naruto was actively contemplating suicide, due in part to some active sabotage performed by the Academy's psychological counselor," Kurenai tightened her jaw and continued, despite the rage that purpled Jiraiya's face. "Hinata got him to open up before he did anything drastic and convinced him that he wasn't a

monster. And then she got me to talk to him as well. Don't worry, that counselor was remanded to Ibiki as soon as we returned to Konoha."

Jiraiya calmed himself with a visible effort. "She seems like a nice girl, if a bit quiet," he said after a moment.

"She loves Naruto unreservedly," Kurenai replied, "or at least to the extent that someone with her problems is capable of loving anyone. One of her happiest memories is of Naruto telling her she was his best friend."

"But he doesn't consider her as a girlfriend?" Jiraiya asked, both puzzled and mildly offended. "He isn't… you know, is he?"

Kurenai frowned. "Hinata, for a variety of reasons, is afflicted with crushing shyness. For that matter, Naruto has only now acquired his first friends. How would he ever have had a chance to learn what love is?" she asked sadly.

Jiraiya looked slightly ill. "The more I learn, the more I second guess the plan we put together to keep Naruto safely anonymous."

Kurenai peered at the Sannin. For an instant, she saw past the gruff exterior of the Toad Hermit and saw a middle-aged man grieving for lost opportunities. "I suppose hindsight is always twenty-twenty," she said after a moment. "But I can't argue with the fact that he is alive today. Your plan wasn't a complete failure."

Jiraiya nodded, slowly straightening back up. "I suppose it wasn't. And I get your point. I won't tease either of them. Much, anyway. If I completely stopped, Naruto would know something was up. He's a lot sharper than he lets on, isn't he?"

"Yes," Kurenai agreed with a smile. "He's surprised me more than once."

For once, Naruto was eating alone at Ichiraku's. Shino had excused himself as soon as they left the Hokage's office. The Aburame compound had suffered some serious damage during the attack, and several of the breeding colonies had been damaged when an incubator heating unit exploded. His clan didn't begrudge time spent on clean-up missions for Konoha, but he did feel obligated to help out as much as possible. Naruto offered to come along and lend some clones to help, but it seemed that the most time-intensive activity remaining involved sorting out the colonies that had been mixed together and making sure that they didn't accidentally interbreed. To Naruto's eyes, most kikai bugs looked alike, and he reluctantly agreed that he'd be pretty useless. Shino had, however, thanked him for the offer, and promised to let him know if they had any 'brute force' jobs left.

Hinata, on the other hand, needed to pack up her belongings at Kurenai's house, as well as prepare for their mission tomorrow. She seemed a little distressed at leaving Naruto to eat alone, but she said she wasn't really that hungry. Naruto also knew that she tended to be a little obsessive when it came to packing for an extended mission, worrying that she'd forget something they'd desperately need once they were gone.

It was kind of odd for Naruto, knowing someone well enough that he could guess why she did something without even asking. He'd almost been that close to Iruka at the Academy, but he hadn't really understood him until that night in the forest with Mizuki. It was kind of… comforting… he supposed, to know someone that well. Maybe it wasn't the predictability so much as what it symbolized – a really close friendship. He was glad he'd found a way to delay her having to go back to her family. It would be good to have someone to talk to while they traveled. Jiraiya was okay, for an old guy, and he was a good teacher as well, but Hinata was, well, Hinata.

Besides, the smile of relief on her face was worth any amount of fast-talking.

And it wasn't so bad having a quiet meal by himself. Ichiraku's was completely untouched during the invasion. It seemed that some of his stray clones ended up congregating on that particular street after their primary objectives were accomplished. Naruto didn't think it was a coincidence of any sort, but he wasn't about to admit it to anyone who asked. Still, he was glad that Teuchi's stand hadn't been damaged at all, and the old man responded to his good fortune by offering half-price ramen to anyone working on village repairs.

Nonetheless, he'd been a little surprised by the extra-warm greeting he received the first time Team Eight visited after the exam. It hadn't even occurred to him that people would bet on the examination matches, but it warmed his heart to know that Teuchi and Ayame believed in him enough to bet their savings on him.

The fact that Iruka-sensei had organized the betting pool, and evidently become quite rich from it, completely scandalized the genin. What happened to the straight-laced Academy teacher that lectured him about proper behavior? Imitating a foreigner to skin the rich bastards of Konoha? Naruto reminded himself to have a few words with his old sensei the next time he saw him.

Still, things were looking good as he started on his fourth bowl of Miso ramen. He had an important mission tomorrow. Hinata wouldn't have to deal with her crappy family for a few more days. He might even get Ero-Sennin to teach them a cool jutsu. And to be honest, he was getting a little bored with D-rank repair missions, no matter how necessary they might be.

Naruto was just drinking down the broth when he glanced up to see Ayame frown, looking over his shoulder. "There had better not be any trouble in here," she said coolly, then turned away from the counter.

Naruto looked to his side as Hyuuga Neji carefully sat down on the stool next to him. The Branch Family Prodigy was moving a little unsteadily, like he'd been off of his feet for several days, and a bulky bandage was wrapped around his head, completely covering his

forehead. He was also dressed in a plain white robe Naruto was fairly sure came from the hospital. He'd seen Hinata wearing one long enough.

Naruto didn't say a word as Ayame took his bowl away and brought him a fifth serving. She didn't ask Neji if he wanted anything, and her facial expression was coldly proper. Naruto wondered if it bothered Neji at all, being treated here like Naruto was treated in a lot of restaurants in Konoha.

If it did bother the Hyuuga boy, he didn't show it. Naruto started on his noodles, pausing only after a couple of minutes when Neji finally spoke.

"Your final blow left a large scar," he said quietly.

Naruto resumed his meal after a moment. He wasn't precisely being rude – Neji hadn't asked him a question yet.

"The Caged Bird Seal was completely obliterated when the skin was ripped away," Neji continued after a moment. "That shouldn't be possible, but the medic-nins think a burst of chakra might have disrupted the seal as the blow was struck."

Naruto resumed eating after Neji fell silent again.

Neji took a deep breath after a couple of moments. "That's equally impossible, at least not without killing me, unless there was something very strange about the chakra that was used. But given how you recovered from having your tenketsu closed, that is not very surprising." He turned on his seat, facing directly toward Naruto. "The scar that formed is also suffused with chakra. When the Elders tried to reapply my seal, that chakra disrupted the attempt. At this point, the medic-nins insisted that further attempts would be too dangerous and when Hiashi-sama insisted, the Hokage asserted his authority on the matter. My Uncle tried to have me immediately removed from the hospital, but the request was refused."

Naruto finished his ramen, drinking down the last of the broth. He wiped his lips and turned to face Neji, going over the speech he'd worked out with Shino. "Is there something you wanted to ask me, or did you just come here to bore me with your medical history?" It was a little weird, but he sort of enjoyed using that snide tone. Shino said it would annoy Neji a lot more than overt rudeness.

Neji's eyes narrowed a little, but he showed no other signs of anger. "I left the hospital because I wanted to know why. You freed me from the seal that has enslaved my family for generations. I now owe you a debt of honor, but I want to know one thing: Why did you do this?" The reserved genin's voice became a little rougher at the end, but he still spoke in little more than an intense whisper.

Naruto looked directly into Neji's eyes for a moment. "I didn't do it for you."

Neji blinked.

"I visited your cousin in the hospital after you nearly killed her," Naruto said. "I saw her every day, and she never mentioned seeing a single member of her family when she was there. She really only asked for one thing from me when I visited her. Do you know what that was?"

Neji slowly shook his head.

"Your life," Naruto snapped. "She practically begged me not to kill you. She knew I wanted to. I still want to. Either that or claw a little lower, rip out your eyes, and leave you forever blinded. She was coughing up blood at one point, but she wouldn't stop talking, wouldn't stop making excuses for you and what you did."

Naruto looked down and saw that his hands were trembling. He took a deep breath and blew it out. "I couldn't tell her no. So you had to live. But I asked my teacher if I could damage a seal using chakra in a special way and he explained how it could be done." Naruto smiled

a little, but it never reached his eyes. "I don't think that was quite what he had in mind, but it seems to have worked."

"So this was just an experiment," Neji concluded in a flat voice.

"No," Naruto corrected. "You're right. You owe a debt for being freed from the seal. But you don't owe it to me, you owe it to Hinata. I did it for her. She hates that seal even more than you do."

Neji opened his mouth to protest, but Naruto interrupted him. He'd had a lot of time to practice what he wanted to say, and he wasn't about to let Neji interrupt him now. "She feels guilty and ashamed every time she thinks about the seals on you and the other branch family members. She'd rather be in the branch family herself and carry the seal than be in the main family and feel responsible for the others being sealed. And even aside from that… despite all the crap you helped her father put her through, despite all the 'special training sessions', despite you almost goddamn killing her for a stupid examination bout… she still thinks of you as "Neji-nii-san", her cousin."

Naruto shook his head. "Did you know her earliest memory is wishing she could trade places with you? She envied the fact that everyone said your father actually liked you before he died, while hers… Well, I guess he liked you better as well, as long as he had a seal on you, right?"

Neji leaned back on his stool and Naruto abruptly realized that he was leaning far forward. He took a deep breath as he straightened. "Does that sound like a weak person to you, Neji?" Naruto shook his head. "As far as I'm concerned, any debt you owe me is really owed to her. Make up with Hiashi-baka if you have to, convince him you'll remain loyal, but look out for her when I can't. Act like her cousin and not just another fucked up Hyuuga idiot. You want to discharge your debt? Well, Hinata wants her cousin back. Give her that and your honor is satisfied. Got it?"

Neji nodded and slowly got up from his stool. He turned to leave, paused, and then bowed very low to Uzumaki Naruto.

Naruto was silent as he watched the Hyuuga leave.

Author Notes:

Many thanks to Runsamok and Bibliophile for Beta no jutsu!

Yes, I know Haku is a boy. That should be quite clear from the last chapter. Naruto just made the same initial mistake he made in canon.

I tried to fill in a few things that were either glossed over, or outright ignored in canon. Feel free to hop on the Viridian Dreams forums and let me know how I did!

Hope everyone is enjoying their holidays and this little belated present…

# Deadly Consequences

Chapter 20

Hinata stepped as lightly as possible as she approached the main family quarters. Odd how she didn't really think of it as home anymore. Staying at Kurenai-sensei's house, she'd felt more welcome there than she'd ever felt in the Hyuuga compound. At least since her mother died. Things had been… at least a little different then… but that had been so long ago that it was becoming hard to remember.

These days, she had little wish to be here, not to mention the risk of encountering her father. Unfortunately, she'd been instructed to prepare for an extended journey and some of the gear she would need was still in her old room. There wasn't time to purchase new supplies, even if she did have the ryou to waste. She just had to hope she could avoid her father and any inconvenient questions he might want answered.

As she neared her objective, a panel abruptly slid aside. It took all of her willpower not to flinch away. Showing fear to her father would only make things worse.

But it wasn't Hyuuga Hiashi behind the rice-paper panel.

"Neji-ni-san?" she blurted out. Against her will, her eyes were drawn toward the bandages on her cousin's forehead. She had little doubt he would find a way to make her pay for her teammate's actions – no matter what anyone said.

"Hinata-sama," he said in a perfectly controlled voice. His eyes seem to pierce right through her, reminding her uncomfortably of her father.

When he said nothing more, Hinata stepped forward to continue on toward her room. But she froze when Neji spoke again.

"Three meters past me and you will fall within range of Hiashi-sama's Byakugan," he said. "I believe he has several questions he wishes to pose to you, especially considering this mission the Hokage has given you."

Hinata stepped back again, not wanting to take any chances. She was surprised that Neji could track the range of father's vision that closely – it implied that he could see almost as far with his Byakugan as the leader of the clan. Yet another realization that must have rankled, given his being born into the branch family.

Neji's mouth twisted slightly. "I take it you have been instructed not to speak of your mission?"

Hinata nodded. He would not doubt enjoy watching father make her squirm as he tried to make her talk. But this mission was also her chance to get away from Konoha and the Hyuuga complex for an extended period of time. She could endure anything in the short term to make that dream a reality.

"I took the liberty of securing the shinobi equipment from your room," Neji continued, pulling Hinata's familiar backpack out from the room behind him. He gave it a small toss and Hinata caught it reflexively, too shocked to do anything else. Through the heavy fabric she could feel tent poles and the outline of her canteen.

"Thank you, Neji-ni-san," Hinata said after she gathered her wits.

"Thanks are not necessary," Neji replied coldly. "It is, after all, the destiny of the branch family to serve the main family, is it not? Retrieving your gear for you is merely my duty."

"As you say, Neji-kun," Hinata murmured, too happy at the chance to avoid her father to care about his sarcastic tone. Sarcastic or not, his voice also didn't seem quite as cold as she was used to. She bowed deeply to her cousin, far deeper than a main family member had any business doing to a member of the branch family.

Neji merely nodded, but his brows drew together just a fraction of an inch. That alone spoke volumes. "Leave straight the way you came," he instructed. As Hinata turned to leave, he added, "and tell Uzumaki that I will pay my debt."

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Naruto paced nervously near the western gate. The Old Pervert was supposed to meet them both there to begin their mission. He wasn't quite late yet, but he sure as hell wasn't early. Of course, Hinata-chan wasn't there either, but he knew she was going to have to try and sneak her gear out of the Hyuuga compound – something he was more than a little worried about.

He'd suggested she just forget about that stuff – they could share his tent after all. Right after he said that, Hinata turned bright red and Naruto wanted to smack himself in the face. He'd offered innocently enough, but he knew exactly how Jiraiya would take that. Best friends or not, a boy and a girl his age sharing the same two-man tent would garner some *comments* from him…

Naruto shook himself out of his reverie. Just being around the Sannin a short while had him thinking about dirty stuff. Kurenai-sensei would be ashamed of him. Hinata deserved better too.

He resumed pacing. Blaming the lecherous old fart was better than sitting around worrying about Hinata-chan. Her father was a major jerk and there was no telling what he might try to pull if he ran into her before they left town. Naruto wondered if going back for her traveling supplies was a way for Hinata to prove to herself that she wasn't really afraid of him. Maybe he'd ask Kurenai-sensei when they returned.

"Oi, where's your girlfriend?" a loud voice asked from behind him.

Naruto had to control himself to keep from jumping. Pervert or not, the Sannin was, in fact, a great ninja, and he'd been able to sneak up on Naruto while he was actively looking for both him and his teammate. It almost made up for his personal habits.

Almost.

Naruto clenched his fists as he spun around, but refrained from lashing out at the old jerk. That would just egg him on to do worse. "Hinata had to pick up her gear from the Hyuuga main house," he explained. "She should be here any minute."

A ghost of a frown skittered across the face beneath the horned forehead protector. Naruto wondered if Kurenai-sensei had told Jiraiya anything about Hinata's father. He opened his mouth to speak, then relaxed when he saw a flash of gray out of the corner of his eye.

"I am sorry to keep you waiting," Hinata said breathlessly as she ran up.

She started to bow in apology, but Jiraiya carelessly waved it off. "You're just on time," he said. "You brats ready to go?"

Naruto and Hinata both nodded.

"Then say goodbye and we'll get started," Jiraiya said, nodding toward something behind them.

They turned and Naruto saw Kurenai-sensei and Shino step out of the shadows of the guard house. She'd already bid them good luck on their mission, but Naruto was touched that she and Shino still wanted to see them off. After waving to Shino, Naruto and Hinata both bowed deeply to their sensei. She returned the bow. Then they were off.

No words were needed.

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Their first destination was Otafuku City, one of the larger cities within Fire Country. To Naruto's surprise, they simply set off down the road at a comfortable walk.

It took less than fifteen minutes for him to crack.

"Is there a reason we are traveling so slow?" he finally asked. "I mean, we want to find this person as quickly as possible, right?"

Jiraiya sighed. "You ever see a cat try to catch a bird?"

Naruto nodded.

"Does that cat run around like its tail is on fire, looking for birds, or does it sneak up slowly?" the Sannin asked sarcastically.

"Do you think Tsunade-sama will try to avoid us?" Hinata asked curiously.

Jiraiya shrugged. "It's possible," he said, making a vague gesture with his hand. "She can sense chakra usage from a ways off, and she tends to avoid shinobi these days, even ones that might be from Konoha."

"I thought you wanted my clones to help find her?" Naruto asked, remembering the conversation in the Hokage's office.

"I will. After I ask her the first time and she turns me down. By that time, she'll already know we're in the area. I'd just like to get close before we have to start actively chasing her." Jiraiya grinned. "She can still move pretty fast when she wants to."

"Great," Naruto groused, "then that means we can't practice while we're walking, can we?"

Jiraiya looked puzzled, so Hinata helpfully explained how Kurenai had them practice various minor jutsu as they traveled.

"Well, I suppose the runt here needs all the chakra control practice he can get," Jiraiya mused aloud, much to Naruto's annoyance, "but now is not a good time. Consider it patience training, brat. You need more of that too."

Naruto glared at the older man, but then realized Jiraiya was deliberately winding him up. With an effort, he turned away from the annoying old coot and spoke to Hinata in little more than a whisper, deliberately ignoring the Sannin.

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Hinata was just a little bit impressed. Naruto was normally so passionate that… well… it was easy for someone to provoke him. She had to suppress a smile when she saw the disappointed frown on the mission leader's face.

"So… any trouble getting your stuff?" her friend asked.

Hinata swallowed. Things had been rather tense at the Hyuuga compound, but Neji's actions were even more unnerving. "I didn't see Father, but…"

Naruto just raised an eyebrow, something he'd picked up from Shino at one point. He only did it around his teammates and she originally thought he'd done it deliberately to tease Shino, but now she wasn't sure. When they talked in the hospital, he used it to great effect every time her words jammed up in her throat. Just thinking about that conversation again made her a little light headed, and for a moment, she had to concentrate on where she placed her feet.

"I talked to Neji," she whispered as the silence stretched out. "He was… different, at least a little. He intercepted me right before I would have encountered Father and gave me my pack. He was still very cold, but not… not as angry as usual. I don't really understand."

"Well, he doesn't have that seal on him anymore," Naruto ventured. "Maybe that changed him."

Hinata stared at her teammate. She knew Neji's seal had been damaged during their match, but after the elders had convened, she'd heard no more about it. Were they unable to repair it? More importantly, how did Naruto know? "How did you know about that?" she asked hesitantly.

Naruto grimaced, scratching at the back of his head like he'd been caught doing something. "Well, you didn't want me to kill him, or cripple him, so I figured I'd see if I could pull that stick out of his butt." He blinked and grimaced.

Hinata stared at her best friend as he muttered about 'unfortunate metaphors' and looked faintly embarrassed.

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Elsewhere, Kurenai, Asuma, and Kakashi had finally met up to discuss their bets. Actually, it was more like Kurenai cornered the two Jonin.

There was a… *slight* dispute regarding the exact terms of their wager. Since the third part of the chuunin examination had not been concluded, there was some precedent for saying that all bets were off.

On the other hand, the words "will get farther than yours" had been used, at least casually, with respect to their genin. By that measure, Team Eight had, with Naruto's and Shino's victories, at least made it to the second round of the finals.

Of course, the final decision regarding promotions was not dependent on the results of the matches. A careful, thoughtful candidate eliminated in the first round by a more powerful opponent might be selected for promotion, while the powerful, but rash fighter might be passed over. Chunnin were generally stronger than genin, but it was their leadership qualities that made the final grade.

Shikamaru, Asuma argued, only forfeited his fight because he realized something was wrong – and anticipated the betrayal and invasion. That was something Kurenai's students couldn't claim. If he'd stayed and fought in a complete tournament, it was entirely possible that he'd have found a way to overcome both Naruto and Shino as well.

Kakashi didn't really have much of an argument – none of his students had even made the final round. He was attending more as a referee and because he hoped he might find a way to avoid giving up his little orange books for two months.

In time, however, the wrangling of his colleagues began to get a little boring – right up until he noticed two cloaked figures drifting through the street traffic.

---

Bored out of his mind, Naruto tried to invent new ways to amuse himself. He couldn't really train or do anything involving chakra at the moment. He didn't know if the old pervert was serious or not, but he didn't want to be responsible for failing the mission if he was.

He also couldn't really do much physical training while they were traveling. This Tsunade-person could move pretty fast if she decided to avoid them – at least that's what ero-sennin claimed, anyway. That meant he couldn't really afford to get tired out, either.

That left mental training, but he couldn't exactly pull out a scroll while they were walking. Not on a mission. Maybe he could work on his observational skills, he thought after a while. Of course, the scenery was much the same, at least until they got farther away from Konoha.

Eventually, he settled on trying to make covert observations of his companions as well as other travelers. The old pervert was pretty oblivious, but Hinata always seemed to fidget a bit when she knew he was looking at her. As observant as she was, watching her without her noticing was quite a challenge.

At first, just watching her out of the corner of his eye and not stumbling in the road was challenging enough. He supposed being able to focus like that might prove useful if he ever had to tail someone in a crowd.

With a little practice, Naruto got good enough at observing that he could actually pay attention to what he was seeing. Hinata seemed… different.

She didn't duck her head down as much as she used to. It wasn't a big difference, but he'd noticed in the past when they sparred she would have to straighten her neck from her normal posture when she slid into her Jyuuken stance. Now she seem to look straight ahead. He supposed it didn't make much difference which way she faced since she had the Byakugan, but it was more subtle than that.

Kurenai had lectured them a couple of times regarding body language and how to interpret it. This was one of those subjects that Hinata was far more adept at than her teammates. Of course, she'd tried to hide that at first, at least until Shino had asked her point blank if she'd been trained in this subject by her clan. It was only then that she revealed exactly how much farther ahead she was than her teammates. She'd seemed almost embarrassed, at least at first, until Naruto *and* Shino had let her know, in their own ways, that they didn't mind at all.

At least Naruto had stopped himself right before he asked her what her own mannerisms meant.

But he supposed it was probably a good thing that she wasn't looking down quite so much. She'd been kind of worse in that respect after she fought Neji and ended up in the hospital, but ever since… ever since the invasion, when she'd subdued Temari. Maybe she was a little more confident? After all, the Sand girl she'd defeated had smacked Tenten around pretty good. That had to mean something, even if it had been a bad match-up for the weapon expert.

Hinata's gait also seemed a little… looser? More relaxed. Her whole body seemed to be that way, not that he was ogling her or anything. Maybe it was because she was finally over the lung damage that had hospitalized her for so long. Maybe it was because she was happy to be on another long mission again. He and Shino both noticed how

much happier she'd been on the border patrol mission. He felt his jaw clench again when he thought about why.

He needed to do something nice for the Hokage and Kurenai-sensei when he got back to Konoha.

---

For someone who'd been accused, with some justice, of living in the past, Hatake Kakashi was still surprised by how the passage of time could change your perspective. He still remembered the last Great Shinobi War. He could remember the battles, the foes he'd killed and the friends he'd lost. But time had a way of passing, of wearing smooth the edges of the hardest memory, until you could recall the facts, but not how it *felt* .

Years of being one of Konoha's elite jonin, feared by many, featured in countless bingo books, had robbed him of some of the worst recollections. Like the sensation of what it was like to face an enemy that outclassed you almost as easily as you outclassed your genin pupils.

He'd gone back and forth with Uchiha Itachi while Asuma held off his partner, Hoshigaki Kisame, with his trench knives. Kurenai tried to ensnare them both in a genjutsu. Three on two seemed like pretty good odds, except Asuma could barely block the massive blade wielded by the shark-man, Kurenai's illusions were almost instantly countered by the renegade Uchiha's Sharingan eyes, and Kakashi… well, he had the distinct feeling the Uchiha was merely playing with him, curious to see what his transplanted Sharingan eye was capable of. Every trick, every stratagem Kakashi tried was countered almost as soon as it was begun, and with far more ease than he was able to stop Itachi's attacks.

Kakashi grabbed Kurenai after Itachi reversed her own Demonic Tree Bind back on her. He got her clear of Itachi's kunai as quickly as he could… but he was fairly certain the Uchiha had time to stab her if he'd wanted to. From the thoughtful frown on Kurenai's face, she'd come to a similar conclusion.

So rather than press the counter attack, Kakashi held back for a moment, assessing his foe while keeping his gaze focused away from Itachi's eyes. Even without making himself vulnerable to hypnosis, he could still read the nukenin's body language with his peripheral vision.

"You have a lot of nerve coming back here, Itachi," Kakashi said in a low voice. "What could possibly make you want to return to Konoha now?" He paused and smiled a little under his mask. "Homesick?" If anything, Itachi took himself even more seriously than Sasuke. Or Kurenai.

"I have been given a task," Itachi said as the tomoe around his pupils began to spin. "A task which I shall complete."

"Don't look at his eyes," Kakashi barked to his comrades, leaving only his one Sharingan eye open now. "Only someone with a Sharingan can face him now."

Itachi smiled faintly.

Kakashi swallowed. "You're after Sasuke?" he asked. It made sense, of a twisted sort, given the last words he spoke to his brother.

"No," Itachi said slowly. "We are here for the key to the Fourth's Legacy." He blurred forward, faster than Kakashi could even see clearly, and buried his fist in the pit of Kurenai's stomach. Even as Kakashi spun towards her, she gasped and her eyes flew open reflexively. Kurenai's red eyes met Itachi's Sharingan.

And she was lost.

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Kurenai found herself in an odd place, tied to a pole like a criminal about to be executed. Something was wrong with her eyes… and then she realized the light that was wrong. Everything around her, including the parts of her own body that she could see, was shaded like a photonegative.

Itachi appeared in front of her, shaded the same way. "This Dojutsu is the ultimate expression of the art of Genjutsu. This is the world of Tsukiyomi, a world where space, time, and substance are all controlled by me. From now on, you will endure seventy-two hours of torture. The suffering of your soul will be real. Your spirit will not understand that this is not reality. Some never recover from the experience, and even the strongest will be incapacitated for some time. Long enough for my purposes."

"Purposes?" Kurenai asked reluctantly. No matter how hard she concentrated, she couldn't feel the underlying chakra of this illusion. She'd already bitten her lip, but even foreign pain couldn't shift this perceived reality.

"I will make you face your worst fears, repeatedly, for seventy-two hours, rendering you insensate at best, and permanently impaired at worst." Itachi informed her. "Either way, you will serve as bait and a bargaining chip with your student. Even if his current protector forbids it, he will offer himself up in exchange for you."

Kurenai tensed and opened her mouth, but even as she began to curse, time seemed to slow down until her words were distorted and meaningless.

"This is the part where you make some tedious statement of defiance. I shall instead begin the torture now." He paused and blinked. "If you retain your sanity afterward, I will be curious as to what you think of the ultimate genjutsu of the Sharingan."

The world dissolved and all awareness of Kurenai's body was swept away. She abruptly found herself pilloried in the large square in front of the Hokage's tower. Also tied to the posts were her students. Surrounding them was a large crowd of faceless people. Despite their lack of features, they still shared common traits, the primary one being a palpable sense of hatred. This was a lynch mob. Looking up at the balcony near the Hokage's office, Kurenai felt her stomach twist as she saw a tall faceless man in the Hokage's robes

of office. The faceless Hokage made an angry gesture and the crowd surged forward.

Naruto was the first to feel their wrath, fingers tearing at his face, gouging out his eyes before hands with knives could stab into his torso. He screamed in agony far longer than Kurenai would have believed possible, until he went limp in a pitiful gust of red chakra, shaded dark by the odd light.

Hinata was crying and screaming as she watched Naruto die in front of her, and the crowd turned on her next. Her voice rose in shrill arpeggios as they tore at her body, until it finally trailed off in a gurgle.

Shino was silent until close to the end, when he gave out a single strangled yell.

Kurenai was almost numb when the hands came for her.

And then she was back in the square again. She shook her head, wondering for a moment why her hair was back on her scalp and free of blood. She looked out over the crowd, blinking rapidly as they surged forward again. Only a single figure near the edge had a face. Itachi.

This time they started with Shino, and then her as Naruto and Hinata screamed their names as they died.

By the time the scene reset again, Kurenai was already beginning to go numb with horror. The Tsukiyomi was feeding on her fears of what might happen to her students if everything went wrong. If an unfriendly, unjust Hokage came to power, they might well be made scapegoats to appease certain factions in the village. It had happened in other lands.

And the so-called Ultimate Genjutsu was working. She wasn't sure how many repetitions of this scene she could endure before her

mind shut down, at least temporarily, to protect itself. Seventy-two continuous hours of this horror would break her.

As she braced herself for the next round of screaming, Kurenai racked her brain for some way of countering the arrogant Uchiha's Dojutsu. She remembered Kobaru-sensei's introduction to the subject of genjutsu, and how he told her privately that he thought she had the mental discipline and imagination to specialize in that area. Not that it was doing her much good now as the crowd ripped at her with frenzied hands.

Imagination… she remembered Kobaru's lectures on breaking genjutsu and on how to beat them. They weren't the same thing. Beating a genjutsu means working with it, through it, or despite it to achieve your objectives, even if you couldn't directly break it. He liked to use physical metaphors for complex subjects, and he once compared genjutsu to mental wrestling. Sometimes the only way to break a hold was to move with it, instead of against it…

As her ravaged body fell from the post to hit the ground in a spatter of blood and other fluids, the scene reset again.

This time Kurenai didn't even try to disbelieve it. Instead, she channeled every morbid thought she'd ever had into making this scene real. This really could happen, she convinced herself, and felt her psyche sink deeper into the genjutsu. Her eyes focused on Naruto as the crowd tore Shino from his post, ribs snapping before the ropes broke. The blond shinobi struggled to free his arms as the faceless villagers threw the bug user to the ground, stomping and kicking at him. Shino reached one hand toward Naruto, two broken fingers twisted obscenely, as his colonies drowned in his own blood.

Kurenai barely felt it as the crowd tore her to pieces. Her own viewpoint seemed to separate from her tattered corpse as it focused on Naruto's face. Tears poured from his eyes as he screamed and cursed as he watched his team die.

And then they went for Hinata.

Kurenai's attention was focused to a razor's edge as they attacked the young Hyuuga she loved like a daughter. Her own imagination supplied new tortures for the Tsukiyomi to inflict on the innocent young girl. But her eyes stayed focused on Naruto's face as he watched Hinata beaten, tortured, raped.

And when he snapped, as she knew he would… KNEW he would… she pushed with all of her will and forced the genjutsu to follow it's own internal rules and make Naruto react… realistically.

Naruto's eyes turned to slitted pupils as he threw his head back and roared. Chakra blasted out in every direction, obliterating the posts and tearing the faceless crowd to pieces. The Itachi observing this didn't even have time to react before he was reduced to a smear on the wall of the Hokage's tower.

Chakra gathered back around the screaming Naruto as the Kyuubi's jailor retired and set his prisoner free. Flesh flowed like wet clay as the boy's body was remade in the Kyuubi's image. The faceless Hokage signaled for his ANBU to attack, and began the seals for a jutsu – right before a massive tail removed the top three floors of the tower.

The Kyuubi reborn roared his defiance to the heavens. The only sign that Uzumaki Naruto had ever existed was a slight pause as the fox stopped and sniffed at the body of a young girl that lay cooling near one gargantuan forepaw. Then the nine-tailed fox quite deliberately stepped *over* the body as it engaged the arriving ANBU.

Kurenai felt like she'd be somewhat sick to her stomach – if she knew where hers was. But mixed in with that was a strong sense of vindication. If this ever came to pass… well Konoha would get what it deserved. If the Will of Fire ever descended to murdering the innocent as scapegoats, then it deserved to be extinguished. There would be… justice.

With that sense of elation, Yuuhi Kurenai shattered the Tsukiyomi like a soap bubble.

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Kakashi was still turning toward Kurenai and Itachi when the Uchiha flinched back like he'd been struck. He raised one arm as if to shield himself from a blow before he shook his head.

Kurenai had her arms around her middle where she'd been punched. But she was slowly straightening as she stepped back. And there was a smile on her face.

Kisame landed next to Asuma and the jonin barely got his knives up in time to block the shark-man's chakra-eating sword, Samehada. "Itachi, what the hell just happened?"

The Uchiha threw the shuriken in his left hand toward Kakashi. With only one eye open, he had to dodge a little wider than he normally would.

During that split second, Itachi palmed a kunai and hurled it toward Kurenai who was still straightening as she blinked away the aftereffects of whatever Itachi had done.

No time for a jutsu, Kakashi tried to throw his own kunai to deflect it… But the angle was wrong and he'd had to have thrown his blade three times faster than Itachi to make a difference.

With a heavy thump, the Uchiha's kunai buried itself up to the handle in Kurenai's forehead.

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Naruto eyed the hotel Jiraiya had selected with some distaste. It wasn't exactly located in a *nice* section of town. On the other hand, he was tired from their plodding journey and Ero-sennin was paying the bill. He'd even splurged on two rooms, so Hinata could have some privacy.

It was almost respectable of him.

Of course, those thoughts evaporated when the old pervert declared he needed to do some 'solo reconnaissance'. He might have been a little more convincing if he hadn't had his tongue hanging out of his mouth as he left.

Still, he wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. He and Hinata had been walking most of the day, with their weights on. It was surprising how tiring it was to travel so slowly, not using chakra at all. After a hot bath, it felt good to lie down for a while and take a nap.

But his dreams were troubled as he slept, filled with a nameless sense of dread.

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"What the hell, Itachi?" Kisame demanded, ignoring Asuma's trench knife sticking out of his shoulder. "This wasn't in the plan."

"The plan has been changed," Itachi rasped, dodging Kakashi's next kunai as quickly as it was thrown. "She proved far more skillful than I had reason to believe. She is too dangerous to keep alive, even as a hostage."

"I don't even know why we bothered in the first place," the shark-man growled as he missed the bearded jonin with Samehada on the backswing. These Konoha wimps were finally getting serious after Itachi killed their friend. What a waste.

"The target has training at evasive tactics," Itachi replied in a bored tone. It bugged Kisame how little his partner seemed to care. "Given his capabilities and who he was seen leaving with, it was logical to seek leverage."

"Well what does your logic say we should do now?" Kisame demanded. It was merely a matter of time before enough of Konoha's ANBU showed up with enough numbers to make things… difficult.

"We meet at the third location," Itachi replied, dropping an armed explosive tag from the wide sleeve of his cloak. It detonated even as it touched the water, sending spray dozens of feet up into the air.

Before the air had cleared, the red-and-black cloaked figures were gone.

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Naruto and Hinata, minus their hitai-ite and in clothes that could pass for civilian wear, slowly made their way through the festival quarter. Otafuku City seemed to thrive on tourism – from the posters they could see, every possible minor occasion had its own festival and some of the vendor booths looked more permanent than the houses.

Naruto had been… discouraged… from participating in many of Konoha's yearly celebrations, so he was content to follow Hinata's lead. A few subtle changes to her gait, facial expressions, and mannerisms transformed stiff Hyuuga formality into the behavior of a merchant's daughter. Before they left the hotel, Hinata had Naruto leave his jacket behind and purchase a bright red tee shirt that did not clash with his pants as badly as he anticipated. She also encouraged him to smile as much as possible after she used small amounts of makeup to conceal the whisker marks on his cheeks.

Naruto thought she was maybe going a little overboard, but any comments died aborning as she delicately smoothed foundation across his cheeks with her fingertips. She evidently found this just as awkward as he did, because she was blushing as well. On the other hand, Naruto knew there was zero chance of him applying anything to his own face without it being obvious. So he kept quiet.

Still, it was almost a relief when she was done and he could relax, being careful not to move his face too much before the traces of makeup finished drying. He watched, fascinated, as Hinata took a small case from a pouch on her backpack and carefully slid tinted circles of some soft material onto her eyes. After a couple of blinks to align them, his friend had blue eyes to go with her fair complexion.

Without her own jacket to hide in, Hinata's body looked different as well. Naruto realized that because it was slightly oversized, the jacket tended to make his friend look smaller, meeker, and younger than she really was. Able to see her arms for once, he noticed that their training regimen had definitely had an effect. If Hinata wanted to disguise herself as the hard-working daughter of peasant farmers, she had the shoulders and forearms to carry that off as well.

They'd been gone five minutes, with Hinata growing increasingly edgy, before Naruto realized he'd been glancing sidelong at his friend the whole time. He awkwardly complimented her acting skills and she relaxed a little.

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They threaded through the booths, slowly winding their way through the festival grounds, heading toward the more adult areas of the tourist district. From what Jiraiya-sensei had told them of his former teammate, Hinata figured that they would be more likely to find her in such areas, especially those with gambling.

It was a little hard to imagine a Sannin 'retiring' to become little more than a traveling gambler, but Hinata could tell there was a lot their mission leader was leaving out of his story. Shinobi of their skills didn't just leave a village without being labeled missing-ninja – not unless there were truly unique circumstances.

From the way Jiraiya-sensei acted, Hinata suspected that his departure was more of a long-term mission than a true retirement. There was no awkwardness as he took command, no unfamiliarity of protocol. He was still on active duty, reporting directly to the Hokage. She was sure of it.

Hinata jerked out of her reverie when Naruto took her hand. The crowds they were weaving through were tighter, the people bigger and older on average. He was only acting like a boy his age might when accompanying his sister or friend in such surroundings. That was the only reason. It had to be.

But that didn't stop her lips from forming a small smile.

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Naruto tensed up as they began to move through the more 'adult' sections of Otafuku's festival quarter. There were a lot of "those" kinds of places, a lot more than in Konoha, and he wondered again what kind of Hokage hung out in places like this.

He also noticed some of the men there were looking at Hinata, the same way they looked at the other women. He took his teammate's hand to make it clear that she *wasn't* there by herself, but he wasn't sure all of them got the message. Mission or not, the first person to try anything was going to get seriously hurt.

This covert operations stuff was harder than he thought.

---

Once upon a time, Kakashi being late for a team meeting was pretty much par for the course. But after Team Seven was so easily eliminated during the Chuunin exam by their former classmates, that had all changed.

Sasuke had challenged their sensei to train them as hard as they could endure and his teammates had backed him on that. Wounded pride wasn't the best of motivations, but neither Kiba nor Sakura enjoyed the thought of being left behind. The fact that they were all struggling as hard as they could to keep up with the new regimen seemed to improve their teamwork as well. It probably helped that Sakura was usually too tired to even talk to Sasuke at the end of the day.

The events of the Chuunin exams seemed to shake up their sensei as well. Sakura didn't think she'd seen a single orange book cover since then, and he was always on time for training sessions.

So when sensei was late this afternoon, the pink-haired kunoichi was concerned. Then she heard a strange bird call, and suddenly leaping figures appeared, darting across the rooftops. She glanced over at

her teammates. Sasuke was sitting quietly, but his eyes had popped open the moment she heard the bird call. Kiba had been fidgeting for the last several minutes. He couldn't really stand to sit still. "Let's go," she said.

"What?" Kiba asked, clearly confused.

"Sensei is late for the first time in weeks, and I think they just called an ANBU mobilization," Sakura explained as she stood up.

"She's right," Sasuke added quietly.

His simple agreement might have made her heart race once, but Sakura was still annoyed with her teammate. Bad enough that he didn't think she could kill a simple snake, but what he'd said about Hinata to Naruto was uncalled for. Even if it was a valid tactic, he had insulted someone who defended him while he was helpless from the curse seal. Sakura was secretly glad that Naruto had punched him for it… just maybe not quite so hard.

The dog user picked up Akamaru and Team Seven set off in the general direction the ANBU had gone. Sakura remembered Naruto's words she'd overheard. 'Sakura isn't as nice as she seems. She only likes one person and she doesn't really give a damn about anyone else.'

It was nearly as hard as sensei's new training, but Sakura was determined to become a better person.

---

Sasuke couldn't fault Sakura's reasoning, even if she was barely talking to him.

A nine-block area near one of the canals was completely locked down to non-ANBU personnel, but Kiba picked up their sensei's scent trail leaving the area, mixed in with a lot of blood that wasn't his. That trail led them to the hospital, where the simpering young woman at the front desk refused to give any details.

At least, she refused to give any information to Sakura, but when Sasuke quietly asked her for information regarding the location of his Jonin-Sensei, she blushed, stammered, and finally directed them to the basement level. It took no small effort to keep his face from twisting in disgust. For one thing, the woman was easily twice his age. For another, it always annoyed him how people made exceptions for him because he was an Uchiha. He wanted recognition just like anyone, he supposed, but he wanted it for things he'd actually done, not just because of the family he'd been born into or the eyes he inherited. Yes, the Sharingan were powerful, but he hadn't done much with his yet. People throwing themselves at his feet for no reason was just wrong, and he found he had little respect for most of Konoha.

He had nearly killed the first civilian that tried to console him about his loss to Naruto, explaining how his clan had tried to get the results overturned by the Hokage. Like that would mean *anything* – a victory given to him on a silver platter because he wasn't good enough to earn it himself.

The idiot had thought Sasuke had drawn his kunai at the mention of Naruto's name.

If anything, he owed the blond-haired idiot for the lesson he taught. He'd been coasting too long at the Academy, assuming he'd be ready for Itachi when the time came. Naruto put paid to that little fantasy. Some quiet observation and a few questions revealed just how hard the dead last of his academy class had been training since they graduated. Rock Lee was another genin that should never have graduated at all – yet he had trained himself in Taijutsu to the degree that most chuunin didn't really want 'just a friendly spar' with the fuzzy-eyebrow weirdo.

And he was Naruto's regular sparring partner.

At least now Sasuke felt like he was making progress.

As they rode the elevator down, Sasuke glanced over at Sakura, who was looking increasingly apprehensive. She looked over at him. "What is it?" he asked quietly.

"My aunt used to work at this hospital," Sakura replied. "There aren't any treatment areas on the basement level."

"What is down here?" Kiba asked in a hushed voice. From the expression on his face, as well as Akamaru's, the smells associated with the hospital must be overwhelming.

"The morgue."

Sasuke didn't react, aside from a small tic under his left eye. But when the door opened, they walked very quietly down the hallway. Voices were coming from the corridor junction up ahead, voices they recognized.

"How did you know?" they heard Kakashi-sensei ask in a tired voice.

"One of my allies was staying with her," they heard Shino say. "When the… event… occurred, it followed instructions to return to the hive and report."

Edging a little farther along the corridor, Sasuke could see Kakashi now, facing away from them, his body bent with fatigue. He had not seen his sensei so drained since the mission in Wave Country when he collapsed from chakra exhaustion after fighting Zabuza. His voice was even more ragged. "I think he was trying to capture her. He used some special genjutsu technique from his Sharingan, and she was able to counter it. But it left her off balance long enough to…"

Shino nodded once. "If she had developed a counter for his technique, he would not want her to share that information with others. It was… logical… that she be killed." The Aburame's voice was flat, but it still put chills down Sasuke's spine. Then the rest of it sank in.

His Sharingan.

*Itachi* …

"I need to report to the Hokage," Kakashi continued, pushing away from the wall. "I wanted to warn you. He's after Naruto; that's why he tried to capture Kurenai. He might try to use you next." Kakashi didn't seem aware of his students' presence, but it was more of a miracle that he could even stand, let alone stagger down the hallway. He didn't even seem to hear the muffled gasp from Sakura when he said Kurenai's name - that's how badly the copy-ninja was out of it.

It took all of Sasuke's self-control not to move, not to breathe, until Kakashi was gone. Then he shot forward and grabbed Shino's arm. In a flash, the air around them was thick with flying insects, each of them buzzing with rage, but Sasuke ignored them. "Do you have a tag on Naruto?" he hissed.

"And what if I do, Uchiha?" Shino asked, his voice even colder than before.

It occurred to Sasuke that it was possible the bug-user might decide to extract vengeance on himself as the closer target, rather than waiting to find Itachi. And he was already in the middle of the Aburame's swarm. "We need to warn Naruto," he said quickly.

"He's out of town on a mission. I'm sure the Hokage will-" Shino began, but Sasuke cut him off.

"Wherever he is, do you think anyone can find him faster than you?" Sasuke asked.

"Perhaps, perhaps not," Shino said. Then his brows drew down. "Why is this your concern?" he asked pointedly.

Sasuke started to snap back, then paused. He sighed. "Itachi is… was an Uchiha. It's my responsibility to stop him, or at least keep him from hurting anyone else if I can."

Shino's eyes seemed to bore into him through the dark glasses. "I can agree, but only to the extent that my teammate's safety is a higher priority than your vengeance."

"Then let's go," Sasuke agreed.

"Not without us," Kiba interjected, stepping forward. Sakura was half a step behind him.

Sasuke shook his head. "You can't leave the village outside of a mission without parental or clan permission."

"Then how can – " Kiba started to ask and then cut himself off. "How can Shino go?"

"My allies are already conveying a message to my father," Shino supplied smoothly. Sasuke wondered if it was really that fast or if the Aburame was lying through his collar.

"Sasuke," Sakura began, "Kakashi-sensei will-"

"He will remember that we don't currently have any missions scheduled," Sasuke cut in. "The only assignment we had was to meet for training and he didn't show up."

Sakura frowned, but didn't say anything. They both knew that it was a technicality, even if it was true. But there was no way he'd miss out on a chance to frustrate his brother's plans.

"I'll mark the trees as we go, like Kakashi showed us," Sasuke offered. "Meet up and follow as soon as you have *clearance* ," he couldn't help but add. He had resented being ordered to shepherd civilians when others were fighting off the invaders, and been lectured about the importance of following orders and doing his duty. Well, now he was doing his duty as acting head of a one-man clan and it was their turn to follow standing orders.

If that made him a little petty, then so be it.

---

It took a while before Naruto or Hinata saw a familiar face. Unfortunately, it wasn't the pig-tailed blonde with the buxom figure that Jiraiya had described. Naruto was rather disgusted to see their so-called mission leader living it up. He had an attractive brunette hostess hanging all over him, and the old pervert was grinning like a white-haired baboon.

Naruto turned to Hinata, scowling. She was blushing a little, so no use hoping she hadn't seen it already. "Perhaps, ah, Jiraiya-sama is interrogating a source?" she asked hesitantly.

"Maybe," Naruto said, swallowing. He was glad Hinata was leaving him an out. She always tried to do that – going out of her way to avoid embarrassing anyone. It wasn't like Naruto was responsible for Jiraiya's behavior, but he felt profoundly embarrassed on behalf of the entire male gender. What kind of shinobi took time in the middle of an important mission for *that* ?

At least it was late enough to justify heading back to the hotel. The naïve young villagers they were posing as were starting to stand out a little, and it would only get worse as the night wore on.

After a whispered conversation, the two of them began working their way back to the festival grounds and to their hotel. No telling when Jiraiya would turn up.

---

To tell the truth, Uchiha Sasuke was at least somewhat self-aware. He knew the reputation he'd developed as a brooding loner at the Konoha Ninja Academy. It wasn't something he'd purposefully cultivated, but he'd have to be an idiot to maintain no idea of how others saw him.

Privately, it still boggled his mind how so many of his female contemporaries became completely irrational where he was concerned.

For the most part, he was satisfied with the results. He didn't want the meaningless sympathy of strangers, and a cold exterior kept them at a comfortable distance where they belonged. The lasting effects of the genjutsu his brother tortured him with instead became useful habits for minimizing useless attachments.

But now, he traveled with someone even less talkative. And, if it was possible, even angrier. Aburame Shino didn't say a single thing after they left the morgue and slipped out of the village. The fact that they went over the wall instead of using the gate confirmed his suspicions about whether Shino had formal permission yet. Not really his problem though. Not like Itachi.

As they took to the trees, Sasuke was a little surprised at the pace Shino set. Aburame were known for their jutsu, not for their speed, but he was actually having to push a little to keep up. He didn't remember Shino being this fast when they were classmates. Had he been holding back, or was everyone getting stronger like Naruto?

Sasuke tightened his jaw, scowling.

---

Naruto and Hinata were both silent as they slipped into their hotel. Between her natural reticence and Naruto's embarrassment over the old pervert's behavior, no one really felt like talking. Naruto almost regretted talking the Hokage into sending Hinata along, right until he remembered the look on her face when she was going to be sent back to her family. There were worse things than the old pervert's amusements.

It was child's play getting to their rooms unobserved. Light as it was, Naruto was still relieved to scrub the makeup off his face. From the way she was blinking, Hinata probably felt the same way about the blue contacts.

After removing their disguises, they were about to head down for a late dinner when a knock came at their door. Naruto supposed the lecherous old goat struck out with the hostess if he was back so

early. He flung open the door, ready to give Jiraiya a piece of his mind, but it wasn't his erstwhile tutor.

Instead it was an older version of Sasuke, wearing a black cloak with red clouds. He also wore a Konoha hitai-ite with a slash through the symbol. Naruto felt his stomach turn to ice. *Itachi* . Sasuke's older brother, the one that killed off the rest of the clan, including his own parents. He quickly averted his eyes. He knew from Kurenai-sensei's lecture on Dojutsu that a fully evolved Sharingan can do things to anyone foolish enough to look into them.

"Hello, Naruto-kun. We would like you to come with us," the man said in a quiet, even voice. Behind him, Naruto could see a hulking figure in another robe. There was something… *wrong* … with the second one's face. His skin seemed to be tinged blue.

Hinata sucked in a shocked breath, and Naruto felt like kicking himself for not letting her check the hallway before he opened the door.

"If you come along quietly," the Uchiha continued, "no one else has to get hurt. You wouldn't want your friend to have an accident, would you?"

"I still think we ought to take a leg off," the figure behind him growled. "Keep him from trying to run off."

Naruto was still in shock when he heard a cry of rage coming from the hallway behind the missing ninjas. Itachi spun with preternatural speed and *caught* a hurled kunai that was moving faster than Naruto could see. The blond shinobi jerked back as a swarm of familiar-looking bugs descended on the blue-skinned killer.

Itachi used the captured kunai to expertly deflect a hail of flaming shuriken. He almost looked bored. His partner swung a huge cloth-wrapped bundle through the swarm of kikai bugs. In its wake, they either fell to the ground lifeless or veered drunkenly. The motion

pushed back his cloak and hat. Naruto's stomach tensed. He looked like nothing more than a fish-man with sharp teeth.

Behind the shuriken came Sasuke with a kunai in each hand, moving faster than Naruto had ever seen him go, his eyes blazing red with spinning Sharingans. He flew into some impossibly complex taijutsu combination, but his brother merely reached out and grabbed his ankle, a millisecond before his kick landed. "Too slow, little brother," he gently chided, then swung Sasuke headfirst into the wall.

There was a crash behind Naruto. Hinata had *thrown* the nightstand through the window. She grabbed his elbow and hauled backward as Itachi turned back toward them.

"Kill the Aburame," Itachi murmured. "He is of no use to us. Send him off to meet his sensei."

Naruto froze as the words sunk into his mind, nearly pulling Hinata off balance.

"It is foolish to resist the inevitable," Itachi continued. "You *will* come with us. The only variable you control is how many more of your allies will die today."

"She looked pretty stupid with that kunai stuck in her head," the fish-man added.

With a wordless cry of rage and despair, Naruto's head snapped up. Before he realized what he was doing, his eyes met Itachi's Sharingan and he knew nothing more.

---

Hinata was nearly weeping with frustration as she tried to get Naruto away from the missing-nins. She'd heard enough about Uchiha Itachi to know they were no match for the S-classed mass-murderer. She hoped Shino was just trying to provide them with a diversion, like one of their tactical exercises.

Her stomach twisted when they announced Kurenai-sensei was dead. Worse, Naruto went completely rigid, and her task became impossible. She just wasn't strong enough to haul him bodily out the window if he resisted.

That was her last thought before her vision filled with red chakra and she was thrown back against the bed. She painfully blinked away the tears that filled her eyes, her head already aching.

And she was behind Naruto.

In front of him, most of the doorway was gone. As was a good bit of the wall. In the hallway, she could see Shino staggering back, his swarm trailing after him. Itachi's partner had forgotten all about him, and was instead trying to swing a massive blunt sword horizontally at Naruto's side. As it plowed through his chakra flare, the bandages wrapping it burned away to reveal a mass of dull grey scales that glinted like teeth.

Naruto's left hand shot out and the blade stopped two inches short of his palm. Red chakra sheathed his arm, and swirled around the sword that seemed to drink it in. Her Byakugan confirmed that the sword was indeed consuming the chakra, but it was being replaced just as fast, with no signs of it being diminished.

But all that was forgotten as Naruto spoke in a voice that was not his own.

"Thank you ever so much, Itachi-kun. Your little Genjutsu utterly ravaged the boy's will, allowing me to subvert the seal. Now I am in control, and the seal protects *me* from outside influences – like your filthy Sharingan." The voice was hollow, mocking, but with a feral undercurrent that made the hairs on her neck rise up. Naruto's free hand rose, and red chakra coalesced around it, forming claws of fire that grew longer even as she watched.

Then a deep voice called out, "Ninpou: Gama Guchi Shibari!", and the walls, ceiling, and floor were covered with a thick fleshy material

that was bright pink and smelled like rich earth and forests. Through the walls, she saw Jiraiya stride into view at the end of the hall, the woman he'd been flirting with earlier slung over his shoulder. "It's really kind of insulting," he continued in a conversational tone. "Did you really think you could distract me with something so obvious?"

"It worked long enough," Itachi countered.

"Not long enough," Jiraiya snapped. "Because now you both die, food inside the gullet of Iwagama-san."

The fish-man growled as he jerked his foot free of the sticky material. The red-sheathed Naruto shoved his sword aside with a contemptuous flick, knocking the bulky man even more off balance. He growled and brought the sword back for another swing, but Itachi barked "Kisame, come!" and they both flashed toward the opposite end of the corridor.

Hinata's eyes tracked them through the walls as they turned the corner. The stairwell was already blocked, and the pink masses were growing over the last window at the end. But there was a flash of black fire, chakra so intense it was nearly solid, and then they were gone, moving beyond her range so quickly they effectively disappeared.

Jiraiya cautiously followed them, scowling as he turned the corner and saw they'd escaped. "Dammit, they got away," he grumbled. Then he turned back to Naruto and froze. That's when Hinata realized that her best friend's eyes had turned completely red with slit pupils.

"Ah good, I still have a little time before the moron recovers," Naruto said in a darkly sardonic voice that was not his own. "Plenty of opportunity to deal with you and properly *thank* you for teaching that blond idiot how to use seals."

Hinata felt like she was watching someone else as her body stepped in front of what was clearly a Naruto possessed by his prisoner. She

swallowed and said "I w-won't let you do that."

Naruto's brows drew down into a scowl. "Don't think I won't hesitate to crush you like the insect you are. Step aside."

For an instant, Hinata wanted nothing more than to do that. She ruthlessly pushed down her fear. "N-Naruto-kun said I was his b-best friend. Do you think he'd let you live if you k-killed me?" She couldn't ever imagine saying something like that out loud, but it was the first thing that came to mind.

The thing wearing Naruto's body looked her up and down in a way that made her *very* uncomfortable. "You have a lot of spine for someone so small, insect. Perhaps you'd make good breeding stock."

Despite the terror that made her want to throw up, she still felt her face redden.

Naruto's body shuddered.

"Maybe you aren't as in control as you think you are," Jiraiya observed. Hinata didn't need her eyes to tell he was smirking at it. Him. Naruto.

"Dammit, without them here, this idiot's rage is fading. Now the seal wants to work properly." Naruto shook his head, clenching his fists. "Hypocritical thing. I'd love to take the time to rip your face off, you frustrated old virgin, but I need you to get this idiot somewhere safe."

With that, Naruto's eyes faded back to their normal blue and white as they rolled back into his head and he crumpled to the floor. Hinata barely managed to catch him before he cracked his head open.

"I'm getting too old for this shit," Jiraiya observed.

Author's Notes:

Yes, I'm back. My job situation has improved markedly with a new shift and a new boss… and now I release one of the more depressing chapters.

Killing Kurenai off wasn't easy, and it wasn't done on a whim. I've actually had this plot point in the outline since day one. But I am going to miss her and her exasperated sarcasm. Using her internal monologue to point out things I found amusing or ridiculous was surprisingly addictive.

Bibliophile asked a good question that I wanted to repeat here:

B: "Checking my timeline here; they fight in Konoha, head to the city where Naruto is, hire a distraction to keep the perv occupied, and then go after Naruto. The time it took them to hire a distraction and make sure it worked is what let Shino and Sasuke catch up, correct?"

Me: "Yes, and it took them significantly longer to find Naruto than it took Shino, since he had Naruto tagged." (Also, the 'distraction' was under a genjutsu, not hired. I guess even Akatsuki have limited expense accounts.)

Yes, Sasuke isn't always a big jerk. Getting his bell rung in the preliminaries by dead-last was sort of a wake-up call. His words to Shino may end up being one of those things you tell someone because it's what you think they want to hear… only to discover it's more true than you realized.

A couple of final reminders:

This story was outlined well before the whole "Itachi was actually a good guy working for Konoha" shark jump. At some point you have to just draw the line and say "based on canon up to this point in the series" and *not* change everything when the source material reveals that "everything you thought you knew about _____ was wrong!" Besides, I think Itachi, embodying some of the more classic attributes of what we normally consider a ninja to be, makes a great

villain. Especially when contrasted with everyone else in the series who are about as 'ninja' as Elmer Fudd. (''Be vewwy qwiet. We're hunting Bijuu!'')

This story is an AU. If you notice someone acting out-of-character when compared to canon, then rest assured there is a reason. An event occurred before Naruto was even born that had wide-ranging consequences. What that event was will eventually be revealed in a future chapter.

Given that I just whacked my primary mouthpiece, I hope it's clear to everyone that no character in this story has 'plot armor'. Some things may go better than canon, some may go worse. Sometime bad things happed to good people. All I can do is promise to make it as interesting a ride as I can.

# A Pyrrhic Victory

Chapter 21

Hinata's fingers ached and it took her a moment to realize that her hands were tightly clenched as she stared down at her teammate's face. Naruto-kun was still unconscious from Itachi's attack, though he was resting peacefully now. But periodically his face would twist into an agonized expression like he was having a nightmare he couldn't wake from.

At first, she and Shino had tried to wake him when this happened, thinking he was throwing off the effects. However, he could not be roused, even when Jiraiya-sama touched a forefinger glowing with chakra to Naruto's forehead.

At that point, he frowned and Hinata felt her stomach drop. Their mission leader was wearing his 'all-business' expression, when the playful façade he wore dropped away and she could see the Sannin behind it.

"I think he's suffered some sort of mental trauma," he said thoughtfully, "and that's why he can't wake up. Fixing that sort of thing is beyond my skills."

Hinata did not allow herself to gasp. She would not be weak now, not after Itachi used harming her as a threat to manipulate Naruto, along with the news of what he had done to Sensei. Just thinking about that for an instant made her gorge rise, so she ruthlessly suppressed it. Not on a mission. Not when she needed to be strong. Not when people depended on her.

"Who can repair such damage?" Shino asked quietly, returning from where he'd laid out the unconscious Uchiha. Using the genin and some shadow clones, Jiraiya had moved them to another inn,

undamaged and more secure, faster than Hinata would have believed possible.

"Coincidentally, our objective is one of, if not *the,* most highly skilled medic-nin on the continent," Jiraiya replied. "It's not directly in her specialty, but I'm pretty sure she could help. We just need to find her before she leaves town."

Hinata spoke up. "Then we must find her, and quickly. Jiraiya-sama, do we really have to stay with the stealthy approach now?"

Jiraiya shook his head. "No, not after all the chakra released earlier. She'd have to be blind drunk not to notice it. She's either decided it doesn't involve her or she's halfway to Wave Country by now."

Hinata had to steel herself not to flinch at the older man's words. They could not fail, not now, not after everything.

Jiraiya was all business now. He assigned Shino to guard the new room he'd rented, while Naruto rested fitfully and Sasuke slept off the beating he'd received. He also left behind a couple of shadow clones and seeded the area with summoned toads of various sizes to keep watch.

For some reason he didn't leave any in the room with Shino. Just the two clones – one that monitored Sasuke's vital signs and another that kept watch out the window and periodically jotted down notes in a thick scroll opened on the table beside it. Hinata thought it was just her imagination, but Shino seemed oddly relieved for some reason.

Within minutes, Hinata and Jiraiya had taken to the air, leaping from rooftop to rooftop as they crisscrossed Otafuku City. Hinata kept her Byakugan active the whole time, ignoring the slow burning sensation that built up in her eye sockets as she compared every face she saw to the faded photograph Jiraiya had shown her. She refused to be weak, not after everything that happened, but her chakra reserves were running low when she got a glimpse of a blond-haired woman's face at the very edge of her range. She stopped dead on her next

landing, cutting back over ninety degrees to pursue the trace she'd seen. She almost thought she'd imagined it, when she found the woman again kneeling down to throw dice inside a gambling hall.

Hinata's relief was palpable, but she was shamed at the way her knees buckled a little as she landed in front of the hall. She was mortified when Jiraiya had to steady her shoulder even as he asked what she'd seen. She merely nodded, unable to speak through her suddenly closed throat, and pointed toward the open doors of the gambling hall.

But the white-haired man didn't sneer at her weakness. Instead, he grinned and gave her a nod of acknowledgement. "Good job, kid. I know you're a little young for this kind of place, so stay close to me."

With that, he threw open the swinging doors and strode in, bold as daybreak.

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Tsunade looked down at the dice in her hand and frowned. She'd started winning, just a little, earlier that afternoon. That wasn't so bad, and if anything might get Shizune off her back about the debts she was piling up.

But now her dice were on fire.

She didn't mind a little luck. Every gambler needed some. But not like this. She'd gone from winning every now and then, maybe coming out a little ahead, to winning steadily. And now it seemed like she couldn't lose, no matter what the odds.

And that frightened her.

Her luck was a fickle bitch. She could only remember a few times she'd been this lucky. She'd purchased winning tickets in two different lotteries on the same day. Another day had seen her draw a royal flush, cold, during a card game with her teammates as they waited for a mission assignment.

The lottery results were announced the day her brother Nawaki left for his first, and last, mission. The poker game had been played with Dan and the rest of his team before the mission against Stone that ended his life.

So, it was no wonder that a winning streak like this put Tsunade on edge. And brought up old memories, memories that could only be laid to rest with large amounts of Sake. She wasn't roaring drunk, but she was definitely speaking-louder-than-necessary drunk.

Sake was also good for letting her put off thinking about Orochimaru's offer. Her old teammate looked like he'd seen better days – missing an arm and one lung somehow damaged by frostbite. He'd fed her some cock-and-bull story about a jutsu that backfired, but what she couldn't ignore was the carrot he offered.

She wasn't sure if this jutsu he claimed to have developed would do all that it promised. But even getting to see them again for an instant would be worth it… even if it meant dealing with a traitor to the Leaf. Besides, what had the Leaf done for her but give her heartache and pain?

She shook her head and prepared to roll again, but a familiar shade of red caught the corner of her eye. Damn. He was still wearing that ridiculous outfit. All she needed to make this day complete was a visit from her other annoying teammate. Ex-teammate.

"What do you want, Jiraiya?" she asked in a flat tone as she stood up. No use trying to enjoy her scary run of luck now, not with him watching her and being all subtly disapproving. Like his habits were any better, the damn lecher, even if he claimed he still served Konoha…

Her eyes narrowed as they picked out the small girl standing in his shadow. "What the hell, Jiraiya?" she asked. "This isn't the kind of place for someone her age!" she scolded.

He shrugged in that way he'd developed that completely infuriated her. It acknowledged that he heard her – he just didn't care. "No older than Shizune was when she left with you," he shot back. "Nice to see you again," he added, nodding toward her assistant, who was holding Tonton, Nawaki's pet pig. "You must be twice as tall as the last time I saw you."

"It's good to see you too, Jiraiya-sama," Shizune replied, in a far too respectful tone to Tsunade's ear. Was she getting old enough for his charm to work? Was she brainless enough as well?

"Well, that makes one of us that thinks so," Tsunade grated. "What do you want?" she demanded.

Jiraiya managed to look hurt, but never lost his teasing grin. "Is it too much to want to catch up with an old teammate? Relive the good old days?" The old bastard was enjoying this, she realized.

"There were no good old days," she snapped, "just a lot of meaningless death and blood shed for nothing." The aftertaste of sake faded to ashes on her tongue.

Jiraiya sighed in a tolerant fashion that made her want to hit him. "I'll buy you a drink and we'll talk, all right? My treat."

Her stomach stewed with resentment, but not enough to turn down a free drink.

A few minutes later, they were in a booth at the bar next to the gambling hall. Shizune ordered some tempura, hoping as always that a little food would blunt the effects of sake. Tsunade couldn't really resent the girl's efforts to curb the worst of her excesses. Not after all she'd put up with in the past. Her assistant also got some tea for herself and Jiraiya's companion.

Peering owlishly at the small girl, Tsunade finally noticed her eyes. A Hyuuga? And with that unmarked forehead, she was of the main house. As quiet as she was, she must be seething with disapproval.

Just like the rest of her stuck up house. Something occurred to her that instantly put Tsunade on her guard. How many favors had Jiraiya used up in Konoha to secure the services of a Main Family Hyuuga just to help locate her?

Shizune valiantly tried to maintain civil conversation at the table as Tsunade glared at Jiraiya. Finally, as the first bottle was emptied, Tsunade spoke. "All right, you didn't come all this way just to talk. What do you want?" she asked bluntly.

Jiraiya grimaced. He was always transparent to her, and it always seemed to catch him off guard when she saw through him. "I wanted to ask a couple of favors," he admitted.

She smirked. *Here it comes* . She raised a hand before he could continue. "I'm not going back," she declared. "I thought I made that clear years ago. That village has brought me nothing but pain."

"Look," Jiraiya said, "hear me out. I know why you left, and I understand-"

"You understand nothing!" Tsunade snarled. Damn, now she was getting mad, and nothing burned the sake out of her system faster than getting angry.

Jiraiya made a placating gesture with his hands, glancing around as their table started attracting attention from the rest of the bar. "Can you at least just take a look at a genin for me?" he pleaded. "He was hit with a genjutsu, a powerful one. I think it caused some psychological trauma, but it's beyond my skills."

Tsunade was a little taken aback, her anger fading. Usually the old fool's pride wouldn't let him fold so quickly. Damn, and she was sort of looking forward to a spat. Maybe she could push him a little further. "So you acknowledge my superior skills?" she asked in an arch tone.

Jiraiya assumed an unusually serious expression. "I have never once questioned your skills with medical jutsu," he said.

Okay, so he didn't want to play at all. "I see. Still, to bring a patient all this way…"

Her old teammate's mouth twisted. "Well, actually, he'd come with us, to ask you about something else, when he was attacked," he admitted. Then he quickly added, "that's a separate matter though. We can discuss that afterward. This… well, I'm asking it as a personal favor. I will owe you one."

Tsunade frowned. In Jiraiya's personal code, annoying as it was, that was a major concession. Still, better to draw this out and see how serious he was. "I thought I sensed some serious chakra usage earlier. If I wasn't retired… I don't know, tempting as having something to hang over you is, I'm not sure I want to get involved in whatever vendetta someone has against you."

Jiraiya's face gave a flash of betrayal that actually made her feel a little guilty. But more surprising was the fact that the little girl who was with him spoke up. "Please, Tsunade-sama, it isn't far from here," the Hyuuga said in a subdued tone. How it must have grated to use such a humble voice. She probably didn't want the mission to fail and let Jiraiya out of whatever concessions he made to get the help of her clan. Well. Maybe she could use that stiff-necked pride the Hyuuga were known for. Maybe Jiraiya would owe *her* one.

"So, you want something from me as well?" she asked. "Okay. Fine. My assistant Shizune here is getting a little too old to take care of mostly menial tasks. You agree to be my personal servant for six months and I'll see what I can do for this genin." She sat back, gently elbowing Shizune to shut her up. There was no way a Hyuuga would agree to-

"With Jiraiya-sama's permission, I accept, Tsunade-sama."

Oh *hell* .

Naruto was normally a sound sleeper, but once he was awake, he was awake. Rousing himself once he was conscious was never a serious chore. And not one usually accompanied by a splitting headache, either.

Until now.

His eyelids felt like they'd been painted over with glue. Reaching up to rub at them was complicated by the fact that his arm seemed to weigh a thousand kilos. Before he even got it halfway there, a cool damp cloth had been applied to his eyes, wiping the gummy secretions away. He knew without opening his eyes that Hinata was nearby. He bit back a groan as he tried to sit up, but his body was not cooperating. That wasn't good. Sensei would have his hide if he stayed in bed all da-

Kurenai-Sensei.

"Is it true?" he tried to ask, but all that came out was a rusty croak. A small, strong arm circled around his head, supporting it as it helped him to sit up. He opened his eyes as she brought a cup of water to his lips. The tears beading up in the corners of Hinata's lavender eyes seemed to already be answering his question. If Itachi had been lying to get him off balance, she'd already be assuring him that their jonin-sensei was all right.

So the even bigger Uchiha Bastard wasn't lying. Yuuhi Kurenai was dead.

Naruto felt his body sag for a moment as despair surged through his spirit. The first adult to take his ambition seriously, and she was gone.

No. She was *taken* . By the Uchiha. Itachi.

Naruto felt his formerly-sluggish chakra surge. With it came a wave of energy as his normal constitution seemed to kick in. He still felt a

general dull ache, not dissimilar to what he'd felt in his arm after he destroyed Orochimaru's curse seal. He guessed that whatever happened after he was knocked out had strained his chakra coils to some degree.

Surprisingly, Hinata didn't flinch back as he stiffened. She merely waited patiently as he greedily sucked down the water. She released his head as he sat up straighter and pushed back the covers he was sleeping under. He was relieved to find himself wearing a plain white sleeping tunic. He hoped Jiraiya had changed his clothes though.

He glanced around and saw the woman they'd been tasked with finding holding green-glowing hands over Sasuke's wrist. "It's a simple fracture. He should lay off training for a couple of days to let it finish mending," she announced as the glow faded. "The concussion should just be left alone for now. He'll be around in an hour or so."

Naruto nodded. It was hard not to hate someone that resembled Itachi, but from what he'd learned of Konoha's recent history, Sasuke *really* hated his brother. Too bad he wasn't going to get a chance to kill him. Not if Naruto had anything to say about it.

The woman who'd been identified in their briefing as Tsunade turned toward Hinata. "You seem to have the basics down," she said with a grunt. "Hope you plan to get used to taking care of sick people for the next *six months* ."

Naruto's eyes narrowed as he looked from her to his friend. "What does that mean?" he asked warily. Sensei was dead, but she was still depending on him to look out for his teammates.

"In return for my services," Tsunade answered with a smirk, "Miss Hyuuga has agreed to serve me for six months."

Naruto scowled and turned toward Jiraiya, whose chakra he could feel loitering near the doorway. Beyond him, Naruto could see the shoulder of Shino's jacket. Just knowing he was nearby made

Naruto feel a little better. Especially since he was likely listening to everything said for later analysis.

The old pervert shrugged. "That jutsu's damage was beyond my skills to repair, so I asked an old teammate to look at you as a personal favor. Instead, she asked *your* teammate for payment."

Naruto grumbled and let out a sigh. In a way, this would keep Hinata from having to deal with her father for a while longer. At the same time, he didn't want her leaving Konoha, even temporarily. Of course, if Tsunade came back as Hokage… "What about the mission?" he asked Jiraiya.

The Toad Sannin made a face and straightened up. "Tsunade, there's another reason we're in town. We were looking for you."

The blonde woman did not look nearly as surprised as the younger dark-haired woman standing off to the side in a black kimono. "You always have an ulterior motive, Jiraiya, that's never changed."

The white-haired man ignored the jibe. "You might have heard that Konoha was recently attacked," he began. "Sensei was hurt pretty badly and lost an arm."

"He's not dead?" Tsunade said quickly. "I'd heard he was mortally wounded."

"No, but his career as a shinobi is over," Jiraiya admitted. He paused. "With everyone asleep during the battle, how did you hear he'd been killed?" He was maybe a little too relaxed as he waited for her answer. Would she correct him?

"A wandering shinobi that was in the crowd," Tsunade replied, but Naruto thought her words lacked her earlier arrogance. Before he'd turned traitor, Orochimaru was her teammate, along with Jiraiya, under the Old Man. If the reports were true about him losing an arm, maybe Orochimaru had sought her aid as well?

"I see," Jiraiya replied and Naruto wondered if he'd picked up on that too. "Anyway, he sent me to find you and bring you back to Konoha."

Tsunade shook her head. "As old as he is now, there's no way I could regrow his arm without killing him. The shock from just debriding the stump would –"

"Not to heal him," Jiraiya cut in. "He knows he's too old. He wants you to replace him."

The room was utterly silent for a moment, before Tsunade let out a contemptuous snort. "Do you really think I'm that stupid, you old womanizer?" she accused in a harsh tone. "Or is this one of your moronic jokes?"

"No joke, Hime," Jiraiya answered in a serious voice. His posture even straightened a little. "He thinks you are the best choice to lead Konoha and rebuild its strength."

"After all I've…" Tsunade shook her head. "No. It's impossible. I refuse." With every word, she shook her head harder, her words growing angrier. "You'd have to be an idiot to want that job."

In Naruto's defense, it should first be noted that he had made great strides in controlling his temper since his academy days. Kurenai-sensei's lessons featured multiple examples of shinobi in the past who had let their anger override their reason, often with tragic and messy results.

On the other hand, Naruto had also recently suffered the loss of that same sensei, been subjected to a psychologically-damaging S-Rank genjutsu, was just informed that his best friend had sold herself into servitude to get a healer to repair the damage, and finally watched someone be offered the one thing he'd desired as long as he could remember. And reject it utterly.

It's really no wonder at all that he snapped.

"Idiot?" he demanded. "The only idiot I see here is you!"

"Watch it brat. I just fixed you and I can un-fix you just as easily!"

"I'd like to see you try it, you old hag!" Naruto smirked as her face colored. You didn't become a prankster of his skill without knowing how to home in on peoples' weak spots. If they were on the same genin team, she had to be as old as Jiraiya. To look as young as she did would require a genjutsu of some sort – which meant she was sensitive about her age.

"Sempai, no!" the dark-haired woman cried as Tsunade gathered herself to lunge at Naruto's bed. "We can't afford to pay for damages again!"

"All right Shizune!" Tsunade snarled. "Outside, you little snot, unless you are afraid to take your medicine."

"Fine," Naruto spat, grabbing the clothes piled beside his bed and marching toward the bathroom. He was just glad his convalescent wear included pants or it would have spoiled the effect.

He came back out in less than a minute, having quickly made certain everything was in place. He paused as he was about to pick up his sandals. "You really think you can take me?" he asked, remembering his mission briefing on the target.

"With one finger," she snapped, turning away from Jiraiya who'd evidently been trying to talk her out of something. She stomped through the doorway and out into the hallway.

The Toad Sannin rolled his eyes and shook his head mouthing something that looked like "blondes".

Naruto grinned a little as he caught up to her. "Why don't we make this a little more interesting?" he asked as he and the medic-nin led an odd procession toward the hotel entrance.

Tsunade's eyes narrowed. "What stakes?" she asked.

"If I win, you come back to Konoha," Naruto said.

"No way," she refused, shaking her head.

"So you're afraid you can't beat me?" He taunted. "What happened to one finger?"

Her eyes narrowed and Naruto was amazed he didn't burst into flames. "Fine," She snapped. "You know, I'm surprised you didn't ask me to forfeit your teammate's six month debt," she jabbed back. "I guess the mission is more important than your teammate to you. And people wonder why I left."

"Not at all," Naruto shot back. "I just want what's best for her." He paused. "She probably didn't protest the debt too much, did she?" he taunted.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Tsunade demanded.

"Nothing you won't find out after you arrive in Konoha," Naruto assured her as they stepped out into the street.

"You are really getting on my nerves, boy," she snarled.

Naruto turned back toward her after stepping off ten paces. "And you called my Hokage stupid," he snarled back as his eyes narrowed and he formed the Ram seal. "Tajuu Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!"

Everything went silent as the street filled with clones… along with the roof tops to either side. Then a double-tsunami of green engulfed the Slug Princess.

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Jiraiya decided to stay inside, having heard far too much about Naruto's exploits during the Sound invasion. Intelligence estimates of exactly how many clones the overexcited jinchuuriki spawned while

pursuing the Sand genin were classified as an S-class secret, but from what he'd heard the boy must possess memories of working beside practically every member of ANBU before the fighting was concluded. The idea of being accidentally trampled by his subordinate was a little disturbing. But distinctly possible. Minato would never let him forget it if that ended up as his epitaph.

Naruto's teammates hovered in the main entrance. Jiraiya didn't know what they expected to accomplish, other than provide moral support as his old teammate wiped the street with their friend. He just hoped he didn't have to sell another one of them into indentured servitude to pay the medical bill.

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Naruto hung back while his clones swarmed his opponent. Creating that many clones actually left him lightheaded for a moment, proof that he was still recovering from whatever Itachi had done to him. Unfortunately, Tsunade was annihilating them by the dozens. The really frightening part was that she was doing it with just the one finger as she specified. He didn't really want to find out what would happen if she struck *him* with that finger, but he suspected it would be as short as it was painful.

Then the crazy alcoholic reached down and struck the street with that finger.

The resulting shockwave blew all his clones off their feet and opened a fissure that arrowed toward him. Taijutsu or doton jutsu, it didn't matter. Naruto leapt backward, avoiding the seemingly bottomless rift, even as he raised his estimation of Tsunade's threat level. He started to understand why Oji-san wanted her as his new successor, despite her personality.

"Get back here, you little coward!" she bellowed. "If you run away, you forfeit! And maybe I'll take it out on my new assistant!"

Of course, that personality could be a weakness, Naruto thought as he gritted his teeth and charged back in.

Tsunade grinned and set herself, right hand back, finger curled to the thumb ready to deliver a flick that would knock an ox into the next prefecture.

But the genin stopped short and brought his hands together like he was about to begin a prayer. "Naruto Majutsu: Chakra Pulse!" he shouted, rotating his palms toward the Slug Princess in a throwing motion as he released the chakra he'd been gathering in his hara.

The Sannin flinched back as the directed pulse wave washed harmlessly over her. Well, harmless to her body anyway. As Naruto suspected, she wasn't as young as she looked, concealing her age beneath a powerful genjutsu. One he had just disrupted.

Naruto let out a laugh. "Wow, you really are old, Baa-chan!"

In an instant, his air was cut off as her fingers closed around his throat. It really didn't help that he was still trying to laugh behind his blocked off throat. The humor of the situation faded a bit as things started to grow dim and his peripheral vision started to grey out.

He noticed Shizune pulling at Tsunade's shoulder, but not doing much to distract her. Then a mass of Kikai bugs engulfed her head and nobody but nobody can ignore that. She released Naruto, formed her fingers into a seal, and dispersed the cloud with a burst of chakra. He felt Hinata's hand steady his elbow as he gasped for breath, trying to blink the swirling motes in his vision away.

However, when Naruto straightened up, he had a large grin on his face. He massaged his bruised throat as he assessed the middle-aged woman with a few wrinkles and blond hair fading to silver. "That was a lot more than one finger, Hokage-sama."

Tsunade's eyes widened. "You did all that, just to get me to break the terms of the wager?"

Naruto shrugged. "It worked, didn't it? Or will you welsh on our bet?"

She scowled. "You're an interesting little pipsqueak, but be honest. Did Jiraiya put you up to that?"

Naruto shook his head. "No, I just remembered something Kurenai-sensei taught me."

"Hmmm," Tsunade murmured as she restored her genjutsu. "I'll have to meet this sensei of yours."

Naruto's face got a pinched look about it as Hinata let out a small hiccup. The Hyuuga quickly walked back into the inn, Naruto following her, looking worried. The Aburame boy, Shino, turned to look at her, his face expressionless below his sunglasses. "Unfortunately, you will not have that opportunity," was all he said.

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Jiraiya wasn't surprised when Tsunade cornered him. He was just surprised it took her so long. In her place, he didn't think he'd be able to control his curiosity as well. That was probably one of the reasons Sarutobi wanted her as his successor.

That, and what he threatened to do if his Sensei forced him into the role. Fortunately, they both agreed that what he was doing now was too important for Konoha to give up.

Of course, given how painful large pieces of her own history was, it shouldn't be any wonder that she could be circumspect with the grief of others. If nothing else, he imagined she didn't want any reminders.

After his "victory" of sorts, Naruto stayed downstairs long enough to inhale some broth and steamed rice. Hinata was unusually insistent that he take it easy and go back upstairs to rest. Jiraiya wondered if she saw something in the boy's coils that worried her. For the brief moments it had been active, the Kyuubi had thrown around an enormous amount of chakra. If the brat wasn't so insanely tough, he'd be more worried about permanent damage.

With the Aburame backing her, the Hyuuga prevailed upon Naruto to return to his room to rest. Shizune followed along to supervise and Jiraiya found himself sitting at the bar next to an irritated Sannin.

"Mind explaining what the hell that was all about?" she demanded after ordering another bottle of sake.

Jiraiya sighed. "Their jonin-sensei was Yuuhi Kurenai. Just passed the exam a few months ago. Uchiha Itachi tried to kidnap her, probably to use as bait for Naruto. Something went wrong and she was killed. We found out when they showed up here to try and grab him anyway."

Tsunade let out a sound somewhere between a grunt and a groan. "S-Class or not, it takes a lot of balls to try and use a jonin as a bargaining chip."

Jiraiya nodded. "The Aburame boy, Shino, says she managed to break one of Itachi's 'unbreakable' genjutsu. He probably killed her to make sure she didn't tell anyone how."

"Damn," Tsunade cursed. "You ever meet her?"

Jiraiya nodded.

"What was she like?" Tsunade asked.

He had no idea where this was going, but decided to play along. "Besides being scary smart? Stubborn, opinionated, and vindictive. She hated my books without reading a single one."

Tsunade let out a snort of amusement.

"On the other hand," he continued, "she was very, very focused on her genin. And it shows. She took three kids, one of whom barely passed the graduation test, and got them functioning at chuunin level or higher in just a few months."

He didn't need to see her raised eyebrow to sense his teammate's disbelief.

"No joke. If the exams weren't interrupted, both boys would likely be wearing chuunin vests. The girl got knocked out of the preliminaries by her own cousin, a Jyuuken genius. Naruto returned the favor during the finals."

"Is he…?"

"Yeah, he's his. Not that it's hard to tell with the way he looks and that hair. Sensei said he's been telling everyone he was going to become Hokage since he learned what the word meant. First thing after graduation, his new sensei asks if he really wants to be Hokage… and then tells him what he needs to start doing to get there. Crazy brat started training sixteen hours a day and by the exams he's learning A-rank jutsu and took down a Hyuuga prodigy using taijutsu."

"You sound pretty proud of him," Tsunade said thoughtfully. Almost all the bitterness had leached out of her voice, and Jiraiya wondered if she was remembering her lost little brother, Nawaki.

"I am," he admitted, "not that I have a right to be. Everything he and the Hyuuga are… is mostly her doing. Now I have a question for you."

"What is it?" she asked, her face guarded again.

"Are you going to abide by that wager?"

She gave him a flat look, but his own expression didn't soften. "I'll think about it," she finally said. "If nothing else, I should go back and see how bad a job they did healing Sensei. I might… hear what he has to say." She shook her head ruefully. "I can't believe I let him sucker me like that."

Jiraiya smiled. That was more of a concession than he'd been expecting. These kids were good luck. Or maybe they reminded her…

"Speaking of suckers," Tsunade continued, breaking through his sake-fueled reverie, "what is going on with that girl? Is she really a Hyuuga?"

Jiraiya's mouth puckered, like he tasted something foul. "I don't know all the details," he began, "but I think you actually did her a favor…"

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Sasuke woke up shortly after they returned to the room. He abruptly sat up, glancing around wildly, then holding his head and groaning. Hinata advised him of the analgesic powder Shizune dissolved in his water and suggested he drink it all. The last Uchiha looked like he wanted to protest, but his mouth stilled when he saw both Naruto and Shino staring at him.

The air in the room was… tense. It wasn't full of killing intent. Not quite. But if emotions had smells the room would reek of them. Naruto figured it was probably a good thing Shizune was off feeding the pig. It would likely be going crazy in here by now. Sasuke sat up, drawing his legs in until he was sitting cross-legged on the mattress, holding his water in both hands as he slowly sipped it.

Finally, he finished the water and spoke. "I acknowledge your grievance against my clan," Sasuke said in a formal voice, reciting words that Naruto wondered if he'd memorized at some point. If his father was clan leader, had Sasuke already been in training on such formalities? He dismissed the thought as irrelevant, but stopped. It was something Kurenai-sensei would have wondered.

"Uchiha Itachi is a traitor to both Konoha and to the Uchiha Clan," Sasuke continued, his voice flat, almost monotone. "But he is still of my blood. I will kill him and avenge Yuuhi-san along with all of the others. This I have pledged."

His black eyes didn't meet theirs, instead staring off into the distance. Naruto realized, with a chill, that Sasuke wasn't really talking to them. His true audience had been dead for years.

"We accept your declaration," Shino said after a moment. "It is widely known that Itachi does not act as an Uchiha any longer. You have also made it clear you plan to end his betrayal."

Naruto turned to look at Shino. Was Sasuke seriously thinking they'd go after him because of Itachi? Or was this formal crap just to make sure everyone knew where they stood? Impolite or not, he wasn't going to let this pass. "That's only if we don't find him first," he warned.

Sasuke looked like he was about to say something, but held his tongue. A muscle jumped along his jaw and Naruto wondered if he was remembering how it got broken.

Good enough.

---

It was a subdued group that left for Konoha the following morning. Naruto found that a good night's sleep had washed away most of the lingering aches, except for the hollow throb of grief in the pit of his stomach. It seemed almost a betrayal to sleep peacefully after what had happened, but Hinata had mentioned that was probably his body recovering from what had happened. It surprised him, just a little, that she'd known what he was thinking after he woke up. But then again, she'd always been good at reading him – much better than he could read her. He grimaced as they walked down the street after checking out. She was a much better teammate than he was.

As upset as he was, though, Naruto still felt uneasy for other reasons. As they left Otafuku City, he thought he could feel unfriendly eyes watching them. With a few discreet hand-signals, he alerted his teammates, but none of them could detect any hostile presences.

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"Orochimaru-domo," Kabuto whispered, his head inclined respectfully, "are we just going to let them leave?"

"Now is not the time," the Snake Sannin ground out, masking his killing intent only with great effort. They were hundreds of yards from the road, under a camouflage jutsu, but he still had to be careful he wasn't detected by his old teammates. "Against both of my former teammates, especially with only one arm, I would be at a disadvantage, and I doubt you could stop that genin team by yourself."

"They are just genin, Sensei," Kabuto murmured. They had seemed slightly competent to him when he encountered them during the chuunin examination, but surely not that much of a threat.

"At least one of them should be a chuunin," Orochimaru snapped. "And the three of them were… impressive… when I was testing Sasuke-kun. Don't underestimate them."

Kabuto ducked his head in apology.

"Besides, I don't want to risk any damage to my future vessel," the Sannin continued. "Soon we will see if he will seek me out, given the proper… inducements. With a new body, I'll have two arms again. Pity. I was so looking forward to corrupting the Slug Princess…"

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Clouds were gathering overhead as they arrived back in Konoha. Conversation had been sparse on the return leg of their mission, which suited Naruto's mood. That was probably just as well, given the pace the two Sannin set. Even Shizune seemed a little short of breath as they descended from the tree-line at the gates to Konoha.

The Chuunin on gate duty snapped to attention immediately. "Jiraiya-sama, the Hokage requests that you report to his office immediately."

Ero-sennin just nodded dourly as they passed. Tsunade didn't even acknowledge the guards. Naruto knew from her reluctance that

something was wrong with her… or at least with her past. He just hoped the Old Man could talk some sense into her.

Naruto felt many eyes upon him as they made their way to the Hokage's tower. It was a little unnerving at first, until he remembered Sensei's lessons and tried to view the situation from their point of view. The death of a jonin in a public place wouldn't have been kept secret for long, especially if she was going to have a public funeral as her rank required.

From his peripheral vision, Naruto noticed that most of the scrutiny seemed to come from older villagers and shinobi, ones who likely knew he was a Jinchuuriki. So they were watching to see how he reacted. Maybe they were worried he would lash out in anger at Sensei's death.

Naruto almost snorted in amusement. Like he would demean her teachings by ignoring them now. He kept his face as impassive as possible. He would do his duty and make her proud. Wherever she was now.

He could do no less.

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Jiraiya lingered at the back of the group. He didn't really think Tsunade would cut and run now – if nothing else curiosity would keep her for a little while. Instead, he wanted to keep an eye on the kids without being obvious about it.

The Hyuuga's body language and posture were a little off. Given her reactions when the Hokage announced her stay with Kurenai was coming to an end that was no surprise.

The Aburame was as impassive as any of his clan when in public view. He was a little surprised to see a slightly sarcastic temperament displayed in private with his teammates, but he figured no one could remain stoic all of the time. He remembered putting together a dossier on the boy's mother before Shibi returned to

Konoha from his posting. It hadn't looked like it at first, but her influence still might breathe some life into the Aburames before that emotionless exterior they cultivated made them truly inhuman.

It was Naruto that was the real surprise. After his rage at Kurenai's death nearly unleashed the Kyuubi on Itachi, Jiraiya wasn't expecting the boy to hold it together this well in the village. Instead of glaring or even visibly grieving, he was just as impassive as the Aburame.

Rather than being impressed, this made the Sannin a little worried as they entered the tower. He wondered if the boy's… former… teacher had the opportunity to speak to him about dealing with loss. Some might admire Naruto's ability to keep things bottled up, but Jiraiya considered them fools. He needed to talk to him, and soon.

Unfortunately, that wasn't to be. The Old Man looked like utter hell, and Tsunade looked like she wanted to throw everyone out of his office so she could examine him immediately.

"Team Eight, Jiraiya informs me that you are already aware of what happened, correct?" Sarutobi said, ignoring Tsunade's glare for the moment. When they nodded he continued, "the memorial service will be held tomorrow, at the Square of Remembrance." He shifted his gaze toward the Uchiha. "Shino, your father confirmed that he'd granted permission for your trip, and Sasuke, you were well within your rights, but in the future I would request that you inform the Hokage's office if you see the need to travel outside the village in the future."

Jiraiya's practiced eye caught the Uchiha's shoulders slumping a little in apparent relief. Surely he didn't think the Village Council would let the Hokage punish him too sharply…? But then he remembered rumors about Kakashi's new training style. Maybe he was hoping the Hokage's acceptance of that legal fiction would keep him on the jonin's good side. Then again, if the stories about Kakashi were true, leaving to warn a classmate of danger was one of the few reasons he might accept for being absent without leave.

Then the genin were dismissed, while the Hokage asked his former students to stay. Jiraiya gritted his teeth and complied. Maybe he would be able to find his godson afterwards.

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Naruto went to bed early that night. He wasn't hungry and even skipped stopping at Ichiraku's after they'd been dismissed from the Hokage's office. Of course, going to bed didn't mean sleeping. Instead, he lay on his familiar old twin bed, staring up at the ceiling in the dark. He couldn't stop visualizing what had happened. Had it hurt? Or was it too fast for her to feel anything? Did Sensei even have time to realize she'd broken one of the so-called invincible Genjutsu? He hoped she'd at least had time to know that. But he'd never know for sure.

He twitched as the latch on the window in his living room clicked. In a flash, Naruto was on his feet with the kunai he kept under his pillow. He peered through the slit of his not-entirely-closed bedroom door. The mane of white hair identified the bulky man climbing through his window. Not that anyone not a shinobi would be calmly climbing through a fifth story window like that.

"If you're here for anything besides cup ramen and old mail you're going to be disappointed," Naruto said flatly as he walked into the living room in his pajamas and nightcap.

"I'm too old to take up burglary, boy," Jiraiya shot back, not at all surprised he was detected. He straightened up and looked Naruto over, raising an eyebrow. "You look like a fish is eating your head," he said after a moment of staring at Naruto's nightcap.

"It was a gift," Naruto said defensively. He thought the Hokage had left it on his doorstep one morning, but he'd never known for sure. "So what can I do for you?" he asked.

"I… thought you might want to talk," Jiraiya said after a moment.

Naruto peered at the older man for a moment. Why was he so concerned all of the sudden? Then he thought about his prisoner and his teeth began to grind together. "Despite what happened with Itachi's jutsu, I am not going to willingly release the Kyuubi," he ground out.

Jiraiya looked puzzled for a moment, and then horrified. "No! That isn't what I meant, brat!" The Sannin scowled, and then took a deep breath. "I just thought you… might want to talk. Alone." He made a face and looked down at Naruto's couch. "I was older than you were when I started losing people in the war. The Old- My Sensei talked to me about it. It helped some. Your sensei isn't around, and I made a promise."

Naruto glared at him while his mind worked. In a way, it made sense. Hinata was at home, where Jiraiya was hardly welcome. Shino had his parents to talk to. Maybe he was just trying to help. Maybe everything wasn't about the damn fox. With an effort, he reigned in his temper. "I'm sorry," he said after a moment, "would you like some tea?" He had some instant stuff that wasn't too nasty, and Hinata had taught him at least the basics of etiquette.

So they sat on the couch and talked. Naruto turned a blind eye to the face Jiraiya made when he sipped his tea and listened as the man talked about losing his favorite student… and how he felt when he'd arrived back in Konoha too late to do anything to prevent it.

Naruto didn't say as much, but did ask some of the questions that had plagued him. Yes, Kurenai-sensei's death had been quick and painless. Yes, from Kakashi's report, she seemed aware that she'd overcome Itachi's genjutsu. Jiraiya even reached over and rapped him on the scalp when he said he wished he'd been there.

"Your sensei was a jonin, brat, facing one of the most dangerous missing-nins of their generation," he growled, "I doubt at this point you'd have been anything but a hindrance. Your job is to work your ass off and get good enough so that when you do get a chance, you can clean his fucking clock. Do you understand me?"

Naruto's fists clenched so tight he thought the skin would split. But he nodded his understanding. "Does it ever get any easier?" he asked after a moment.

"Not even a little," Jiraiya said. "And if it ever does, then I don't want to know you. Understand?"

Naruto slowly nodded.

"Good," Jiraiya said. "We get enough of that crap from Danzo's little cult. He says that the perfect ninja has no emotions, but people that practice that nindo never seem to last. They either completely lose their personality, or they crack like Itachi did."

Naruto scowled at the reminder. He wondered if Jiraiya was doing that on purpose… maybe an enemy would mention Itachi just to provoke him? It was something to consider. Kurenai-sensei would do something like that.

As the night wore on, the pauses between questions and answers grew longer and longer until Naruto finally drifted off to sleep. He was mildly surprised to wake the next morning tucked securely into his own bed.

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The weather the following day was appropriately gloomy. Storms had moved in during the night, and the morning dawned damp and overcast. Naruto found it appropriate as he slowly donned the plain black formal uniform that every shinobi was issued, but no one spoke of. The funereal garb was worn only if a shinobi of jonin or higher rank was killed in service of the village. Such occasions demanded a formal memorial service. Not many attained such an exalted rank, and the loss of even one was a hard blow that must be acknowledged by the village as a whole.

This tradition began with the founding of the Village Hidden in the Leaves, and was still followed to the letter. Naruto stared at the dark fabric bunched in his hands. If the rumors were true, he nearly had to

wear this for the Old Man's funeral. He squeezed his eyes shut as they burned. It wasn't fair! Why did she have to die when he wasn't there to do anything to stop it!

The fine hairs on his forearms bristled as he felt his chakra circulate faster. With an effort, he calmed himself. He would not dishonor his sensei with an outburst, especially not today. He let out a shaky breath and thought about Jiraiya's words the previous night.

Naruto shook himself and slowly got dressed. The reality of what he faced today made everything seem… off. Almost dreamlike. Maybe part of him hoped this was all a bad dream he could wake up from. Even with no basis in reality, just the possibility made his pulse race. He clamped down on his emotions again. Jiraiya's words aside, this wasn't the time to give in to them.

He dressed mechanically and made his way to the square at the appointed time. The overcast morning light seemed to leach the color out of everything it touched, making the horrible occasion seem even more unreal. It wasn't until he saw his teammates that everything became real for Naruto. Shino stood as still as a statue, flanked by his parents. Hinata's blank white eyes were rimmed with red.

The Hyuuga was flanked by her cousin and father. While Neji stood at her elbow, his presence was at worst neutral. Her father, on the other hand… Fine wrinkles gathered at the corners of his eyes. While his eyes were as pupilless as any Hyuuga's, his attention seemed to be fixated on his eldest child as she held herself stiff and still. Given what he heard of the clan elder, he was probably searching for any crack in Hinata's public veneer, so he could reprimand her later.

Bastard.

His appearance, along with the more welcome presences of Shibi and Misato, also served to remind Naruto that with no family, he stood alone. He glanced toward the podium, where Jiraiya and

Tsunade flanked the Hokage. Jiraiya looked uncomfortable, but didn't move.

Naruto flinched a little when a hand came down on his shoulder. Iruka-sensei was there, flanked by Konohamaru and his friends. The scar-nosed chuunin gave his former student a sad smile. Konohamaru was uncharacteristically pale and silent. Naruto supposed the death of an adult who'd rescued him was a hard blow. Naruto gave them both a firm nod and straightened his spine a little.

A light drizzle fell as everyone assembled into ranks and the old man gave a short speech. Naruto couldn't recall a single word of the eulogy. Instead, his eyes sought out the framed photograph of Yuuhi Kurenai that was placed on a fabric-covered stand at the front of the square.

Naruto wondered if she knew what this picture would be used for when it was taken. Her brows were slightly drawn together in a frown of concentration, her features displaying the ferocious intelligence with which she approached everything. Sensei didn't accept mysteries in life – everything could make sense, and *would* make sense if she had enough time to figure it out.

The realization hit him like a kick to the stomach. Now she had no more time, and she wouldn't be figuring out anything else, ever again. Whatever she had that let her see him, see the real him, and believe in him… that was gone, gone forever. He didn't even realize he'd fallen to his knees until the damp pavement soaked through the fabric.

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Hinata had managed, with some subtle assistance from Neji, in avoiding her father for most of the previous evening. But tradition required the clan to travel to the memorial service as a group.

She felt her father's eyes on her the entire way.

She didn't know if he knew about her pledge to Tsunade-sama yet. She imagined not, since he hadn't said anything to her yet. It hadn't occurred to her at the time, but on reflection knew he'd take offense.

Surprisingly, she didn't care.

There were plenty of reasons she'd done it. A ploy to get the future Hokage interested in the village. A desperate desire to see Naruto restored to consciousness. But in her heart of hearts, Hinata knew the truth. The moment the older woman had suggested her fee, Hinata immediately accepted because she knew it would be six months that she wouldn't have to return home. To a place she no longer saw as home.

She inhaled slowly, willing her hands to still the trembling that threatened to show. If she wasn't working twenty-four hours a day, she would still be able to see Naruto. Training with him would only make her a more valuable servant, so Tsunade probably wouldn't object. Her objections made sense, unlike… others.

Not having to go home. Still being able to see Naruto and Shino. It would be almost as good as the time she spent with Kurenai-sensei.

Hinata swallowed, the skin around her eyes growing fever-warm. The time she'd spent "convalescing" after she was discharged from the hospital was one of the best times she could remember. The only times that approached it had been when she was very young and her mother was still alive. Father… was distant, but not the looming angry presence he was now. He seemed… content to leave her to her mother. A mother that didn't seem distressed at Hinata's shyness.

She and Sensei had talked for hours, especially that first night. Their first conversation after her fight with Neji had left them awkward, with things between them that could never be unsaid. But Sensei had explained why, and her reasons made sense. Hinata was horrified at her teacher's predictions of Naruto and Shino's actions if she had found the death she sought. But at the same time, a small corner of

her soul wondered aloud at the thought of anyone valuing her life so much.

Their talk had consumed the entire evening and left Hinata drained of energy, but as she dropped off to sleep, she also felt lighter in spirit than she could ever remember.

After that, they were more comfortable around each other, like some barrier had been broken down. Kurenai-sensei was very rigorous in her supervision of Hinata's breathing exercises, but her supervision was interspersed with praise – rather than reminders of the foolishness that led to her injury. It bothered Hinata so much that she finally asked Sensei about it.

"Hinata, you know what you did wrong, what good would it do to keep reminding you of it?" Kurenai had asked in return. It was such a simple question, but it stopped the Hyuuga girl in her tracks. What good did it do? What good did it do when her father berated her over and over for every mistake? What good did it do when he reminded her of her failures before every match with her sister? What good did it do to make sure she was always aware of what a failure she was?

No good at all.

Then why did he do it?

Hinata clenched her fists at her sides as the eulogy ended. The weather finally broke, a soft drizzle falling on the assembled mourners. She looked at the portrait of her sensei, and recalled their last private conversation. Sensei had told her how proud she was of her recovery and the way she'd helped her teammates. Then she asked her specifically to watch out for Naruto.

That puzzled Hinata, as by now she was sure he was the better fighter. But Kurenai simply smiled and shook her head. "That's not the kind of help I think he needs the most," was all she said. Hinata still wasn't sure what that meant, but since then she'd seen how badly he'd been affected by the news of Sensei's death. Not all hurts

were physical, and it scared her a little to see how badly it cut into him.

Her Byakugan was not active, but motion at the edge of her vision still caught her attention. She swallowed hard as Naruto's legs buckled and his knees hit the pavement. Iruka-sensei squeezed the boy's shoulder, but Konohamaru glanced around, looking a little panicked.

Hinata was moving before she even thought about it. She felt her father's eyes boring into her back, but nothing in the world would stop her from fulfilling Sensei's last request.

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Naruto swallowed the hot bile burning the back of his throat as he felt the sense of loss roll over him. If this is what it lead to, maybe that Danzo guy wasn't as stupid as Jiraiya thought. He simultaneously wanted to scream, throw up, and run over and tear that casket open. He wanted to see Kurenai again, and shake her until she woke the hell up and –

His jumbled thoughts cut off as a small but strong pair of arms wrapped around his neck. His head was cool from the steadily strengthening rain, but his eyes felt hot and his vision was too blurry to see now, but he knew it was Hinata, and her father was going to freak out on her and—

Biting back a sob, he wrapped his arms around her waist and squeezed her like a drowning man would hold a life preserver. His eyes screwed shut, he could hear the steady pound of her heart through her jacket. The sound seemed to soften the jagged shards of grief ripping through his insides. His whole body shook as hot tears poured from under his closed eyes. He didn't want to open them, knowing they'd be red for more than one reason.

Then another arm draped across his shoulders and the sound of Hinata's heartbeat was joined by an agitated, but steady hum.

Shino's hives, Naruto realized in an instant. He let out a shuddering breath.

No he wasn't alone. He'd never be alone.

---

The sound of teeth grinding was audible from several feet away. Hyuuga Hiashi had seemed shocked, at first, at his daughter's violation of proper decorum. Especially as it was to comfort an ill-bred piece of trash that clearly had no idea how to behave in public.

He settled for glaring at her for a moment. Hopefully, when she looked back, she'd see his expression and realize the gaffe she had committed. That way she would know to return to her proper place without him having to break protocol as well.

Except she didn't turn around. Or even look back.

His sense of outrage building, Hiashi was about to step forward to retrieve his errant child when he blinked in confusion. The Aburame boy was standing with them as well now, engaging in *very* unusual behavior for one of his clan. Had that wretched brat infected his entire team with the seeds of madness?

He shook his head. That was a problem for the boy's parents to deal with. He had his own daughter to discipline. It was at this moment that two shinobi, both wearing the formal black tunic and pants, stepped forward, flanking him on each side.

Hiashi froze at the sudden violation of his personal space. He could banish them in an instant with a Kaiten, but to do so now, for anything less than an actual assassination attempt, was unthinkable. And that was a remote possibility, at best, as he recognized both men.

To his right, Hatake Kakashi spoke first. His lips barely moved under his ever-present mask, but the words were clear. "Appropriate weather for a funeral," he said.

"I suppose," Sarutobi Asuma rumbled, a little louder. "Rather not have any at all."

"True," Kakashi agreed. "Still, it's nice to see such a strong turnout. Making Jonin is hard work, something that people should recognize, even if they never see us doing our jobs, neh?"

"If we do it right, no one ever sees us," Asuma agreed.

Kakashi nodded. "Good to see that respect. It's important. Especially since Kurenai was one of us, right, Asuma?"

"Right, Kakashi."

Kakashi nodded again. "Good to see her team together like that. Shows how much she will be missed."

Hiashi made a sharp inhalation. If he thought the humiliation of the Hyuuga clan was some sort of tribute to—

"They're doing better than I did," Kakashi added, seemingly as an afterthought. "When my sensei died, I went on a bender, just so I'd be too drunk to attend the ceremony."

"I didn't know that," Asuma added quietly.

"Things were really a mess back then, I doubt anyone really noticed. I'm sure Sensei understood." Kakashi murmured. "Anyway," he added in a firmer voice, "I know you have no wish to do anything that might seem disrespectful to Kurenai-san's memory, so you'll stay right here and leave her team alone to say goodbye as they wish to."

"You have no right to interfere with my clan," Hiashi hissed under his breath.

"No, I don't," Kakashi agreed. "But I do have a right to share any jutsu I've acquired. You know, 'Copy-Cat Ninja Kakashi' and all that. Bingo book says I know over a thousand." He shrugged eloquently. "I know of *at least* two dozen that can neutralize or otherwise bypass

eye bloodlines… like the Byakugan. Iruka's always after me to contribute some jutsu to the Academy curriculum, especially for their advanced jutsu workshops."

Hiashi froze in place. He turned his head fully toward the former ANBU Captain. "That's treason," he said harshly.

"No, not at all. I'm providing these to the village as a whole. Just because everyone else in the village learns how to fight against the Byakugan – if they have to – doesn't make it treason *against Konoha* , does it?"

"I don't have anything half so elegant," Asuma added. "I'll just kick your ass if you take one step towards those kids."

Hiashi turned toward the more direct threat. "Do you really think you can do that?" he asked with a sneer.

"A few days ago," Asuma replied in a low tone as the rear ranks of the assembly slowly departed, "the two of us were fighting two of the most dangerous missing-nins in the world. We were out of position or too slow to save a valued comrade from being killed. Now here you are, someone she clearly despised, trying to make an ass of yourself and disrupt her funeral." He paused. "How can we not?"

Hiashi barely stopped himself from lashing out at the fool and making an even bigger spectacle of himself. "You haven't heard the last of this," he snarled.

Kakashi merely nodded thoughtfully.

"Come, Neji," Hiashi commanded, and stalked toward the back of the Memorial Square.

Neji nodded and followed. His expression did not change as he caught the eye of his own sensei, who had a somber expression, but still spared his student a nod.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to Runamok and Bibliophile for awesome beta work.

Someone has already asked about the Rasengan. Just because Naruto doesn't learn it at exactly the same time as canon doesn't mean he will never learn it. Do you really think Jiraiya won't at least *try* to teach Naruto the technique his father *invented* ?

On a side note, I have a short story that's been published in Jim Bernheimer's *Horror, Humor, and Heroes, Volume Two: New Faces of Fantasy* . I'll put a link in my profile if anyone is interested in checking it out.

# Endings and Beginnings

Chapter 22

"Standing out in the rain, getting soaking wet, was the last thing you needed in your condition," Tsunade said with a frustrated sigh.

"It was necessary," her old sensei replied. "We cannot afford to show any weakness until your position is secure."

She ground her teeth, but didn't let her concentration falter as she laid a hand, glowing with green healing chakra, on the old man's back. The jutsu was designed to boost his immune system, even as it reduced the inflammation in his lungs. He still wasn't fully recovered from the hypothermia and loss of his arm, and after the memorial service, he'd come down with a cough. It was mild enough at the moment, but she wasn't about to take any chances. Her sensei was an old man, and he'd abused his body one too many times after coming out of retirement. From an objective point of view, retiring was the only logical course of action, and as a physician she applauded his good sense.

If only it hadn't meant saddling her with his job. Damn, she needed a drink.

After a minute, she released her jutsu and stepped back. The old man straightened and took a deep breath. He smiled. "You haven't lost any of your skills," he said.

"Flattery might get you somewhere with Shizune, but not me," Tsunade replied. "I artificially boosted your immune system, but it's only temporary. If you don't take care of yourself, you'll be a lot sicker when it wears off. That means no strenuous activities, lots of clear fluids, and a minimum of twelve hours of sleep every night."

"I don't think I've ever had that much sleep in a night since I was a chuunin."

"Get used to it old man," she snapped. "You aren't a teenager anymore, and your body needs time and rest to recover."

"I suppose that means we need to move up your assumption of the office then," he said quietly.

Tsunade didn't like it, but she nodded anyway. As much as she didn't really want the responsibility, it didn't change the facts of her prognosis.

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Naruto stood, hands clenched into shaking fists, staring at the gate.

"Go ahead and open it," Ero-sennin grumbled behind him.

After a moment, he bowed to the inevitable and opened the gate. A gravel path led to Sensei's... what used to be Sensei's house. He still felt a little numb as he walked, his sandals making almost no noise. The gravel was tightly packed, and endless hours of practice made it a habit to move without disturbing the ground more than necessary.

Yet another thing she'd taught him. Something else he'd never have a chance to thank her for.

Naruto took in a deep breath through his nose, and held it for a moment before letting it slowly puff out his cheeks as he exhaled. This was a lot harder than he imagined, and he didn't think for an instant it would be easy. The Hokage acted as the official executor for the wills of any Konoha shinobi that did not specifically assign one. He was a little surprised when Jiraiya showed up at his apartment with a sealed scroll, but he knew Oji-sama was still recovering – not to mention buried in paperwork.

Then the old pervert really knocked things askew when he bluntly told Naruto he'd asked for the chore. "I'm going to make sure you

don't do anything stupid while you are still getting your act together," he'd said. Naruto bristled a bit at that, but went silent when he learned that Sensei had left him her *house* . Her *home* .

His first impulse was to say he didn't want it. He wanted no profit from her death. But before he even opened his mouth, he knew that was one of those stupid things Ero-sennin was talking about. Just his luck he'd have gotten someone assigned to the will who wanted revenge on the fox, and would have found some way to cheat him. So he'd held his tongue, and gave the white-haired old perv as respectful a nod as he could manage.

The keys were loud in the lock as Jiraiya opened the front door. The air inside was so still. Naruto knew it was his imagination. The house hadn't stood empty that long at all. But, nonetheless, he felt like an intruder here. His stomach grew leaden as Jiraiya spread the papers on the table in the kitchen.

Showing an unexpectedly sensitive side, he turned away to fuss with the tea... and let Naruto read Kurenai's words with no audience.

*If you are reading this, then something has happened to me. Hopefully, whatever happened to me did not harm your teammates... but if that is the case, then you may alter my last instructions to you accordingly. Your teammates will do the same with the packets that are to be delivered into their hands.*

Her words were surprisingly formal. But that actually helped. It was like a mission briefing. No emotion, just information. And the mission. He felt his jaw set in a determined line. If she had one last mission for him, then Uzumaki Naruto would make damn sure it was a success.

*I have no blood heirs, and am the last of my line. As such, I have free reign with respect to the disposal of my material assets. My home, the land, and all associated assets will pass into the possession of Uzumaki Naruto, upon the condition that this home always remain a safe haven for his squadmates, Hyuuga Hinata and*

*Aburame Shino, and their heirs. When you became a team, I gave you a charge, perhaps unfairly, to look out for your teammates. That is because I recognized your potential, your strength... the Will of Fire that the Hokage speaks so highly of. I can only say in my defense that I was proven correct to believe in you, Naruto. My last request is that you continue to do so. I will leave you most of my material assets to make this possible.*

*I freely admit that in writing this document, I have laid a very heavy burden on someone who is just getting ready to test for Chuunin. However, I am also making similar requests of the others. Together, the three of you have become a remarkable team, one I am humbled to have had a part in creating. Stay true to each other, and I will rest content, knowing that the legacy I leave to Konoha will be greater than I could ever have imagined.*

Naruto swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat. She was... proud... of him, and his team. So proud. Her legacy... to Konoha? That's how she saw Team Eight?

Naruto stared through a window into the approaching twilight as the smell of brewing tea filled the kitchen.

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Naruto slowly moved into his new home. He wasn't reluctant to leave the apartment – he just didn't know what to do with Sensei's things. Fortunately, Hinata volunteered to help him pack her things away without even being asked. Whether it was her own thoughtfulness, or Sensei thinking ahead one last time, it didn't matter – he was grateful.

Shino helped with the garden out back. Naruto enjoyed gardening himself – Mr. Ukko was thriving far better on the back porch than he ever had in his pot at the apartment. But Shino was an Aburame – and they cheated. As his colonies swept the yard for inimical insects, Shino mentioned that most of Konoha's farmers paid a small retainer to his clan to keep their harvests pest-free. As he watched his friend's kikai bugs march off to battle, Naruto could believe it.

Eventually, though, his teammates returned to their homes, and Jiraiya went to do whatever it was he did at night. The quiet inside his former sensei's home was palpable, leaving Naruto to fidget nervously. He couldn't help feeling like an intruder – or worse, a thief. He repeated Kurenai-sensei's words in his mind, trying to focus on the last mission she'd laid upon him. Finally, he sat at the hearth in the kitchen, heating water for tea. He wasn't really thirsty – it was more in the way of needing something to do.

As he shifted to put the kettle over the fire, Naruto felt one of the hearth stones shift slightly under his weight. Frowning, he stood up, wondering if the mortar needed to be patched. Pulling at the stone, he was surprised when it shifted slightly to the side and abruptly came entirely loose from the hearth.

Frowning, Naruto laid the stone to one side and inspected the hollow beneath it. Inside was a tightly-wound scroll. He swallowed as he unrolled the first few inches and saw it was addressed to him.

*Naruto,*

*Please try to read this when you are alone. The information on this scroll is potentially dangerous, especially if certain parties were aware you knew it. If you are reading this, I am more than likely dead. If that is not the case, please return this scroll to it's hiding place and ask me about it the next time we are alone.*

*If I am no longer available, then I will gift you with all that I know, and let you make what use of it that you will. As you will soon discover, this is not a pleasant gift. The truth never is, which is why so many would hide it given the chance.*

*We've spoken before of looking "underneath the underneath". There are times that is very, very hard to do – especially if it means confronting uncomfortable truths about one's home. By the time you finish reading this, you may wish to burn this scroll and forget it ever existed. I would not blame you. But I would not rest easy in the*

*afterlife if I died without making provisions for you to have everything you might possibly need to keep yourself and your teammates safe.*

*Most of this deals with a cautionary tale from my own past, and a great deal of guesswork as to how things happened the way they did. If I had concrete proof of everything I suspect, I would have gone to the Hokage with it long ago. Unfortunately, some charges cannot be made without iron-clad evidence. Do not blame Hokage-sama for this – it is for the good of the village.*

*The focus of this sorry tale is my genin squad under Kobaru-sensei. My teammates were Inuzuka Nomaru and Fukuda Mattai. Nomaru was a member of the Inuzuka clan, and embodied their best... and worst traits. He was brave, loyal, brash, and a little conceited. Still, he was a good friend, and I'd like to think that, if he'd had a chance to mature a little more, he would have been a credit to his clan.*

*Mattai was raised in a farming village outside Konoha, but while bringing their harvest to Konoha, his family was killed in a bandit attack. A chuunin patrol chasing down the bandits arrived in time to save Mattai and brought the orphaned boy back with them. He applied to join the Ninja Academy and was accepted after they discovered he had the potential to channel chakra. He was a couple of years older than I and the rest of his classmates, but he was very focused and quickly caught up to the rest of us in his studies.*

*He was a little unusual looking. His eyes were almost as pale as a Hyuuga's, but his deeply tanned complexion and messy black hair betrayed his "peasant" origins. A few children raised in various clans sneered a little at the 'country bumpkin', but Mattai ignored them. If anything, the taunts made him work even harder.*

*I'm proud to say that Nomaru and I never had any part of that.*

*As he trained, Mattai displayed a true talent for Taijutsu, and was one of the best in our class by the graduation exams. In time, the three of us were assigned to Kobaru-sensei and began taking D-ranked missions. Mattai's work ethic and unrelenting good cheer*

*made the insufferable tasks all the more bearable. In time, I came to consider him my best friend, with Nomaru a close second.*

*In time, we eventually progressed to C-ranked missions and began performing reconnaissance missions outside the village. Our team, with an Inuzuka's nose, my talent for Genjutsu, and Mattai's ability to move stealthily and disable enemies quietly with Taijutsu, were eventually groomed as a scouting team. As we grew older, Nomaru began dating a village girl and I started wondering if my feelings toward Mattai might lead to more than just friendship.*

*It was a couple of years after you were born that we first ran into serious trouble. The attack of the Kyuubi left Konoha's ranks depleted for years, and Iwakagure began pressing our borders, confident now that the Yellow Flash was no longer around. We were patrolling the border, not unlike the first mission of Team Eight – only with Iwakagure clearly spoiling for a fight.*

*Our team ran into a heavy ambush. The opponents were either extremely competent bandits bribed by the Iwa ninjas, or simply Iwa shinobi out of their uniforms. It was clearly an attempt to make us 'disappear' while on our mission, and perhaps torture some information out of us regarding Konoha's forces in the region.*

*We were trying to fight free, but it was heavy going. Nomaru was wounded early in the struggle, and Kobaru-sensei was half-carrying him as we tried to disengage. The enemy was using a lot of smoke grenades, which suggested they were really Iwakagure shinobi – most Iwa ninjas mastered the ability to locate their enemies from the vibrations of footsteps in the earth.*

*We were surrounded by billowing smoke, with enemies leaping out of the murk, trying to kill us, then leaping back. Some nights, I still dream about that fight. As we were about to break into the clear, I saw the smoke part and a bandit with a spear leaped out to spit Mattai like a game bird. I was glancing back at him as this happened, and I suppose something in my expression gave it away. The instant before the blow landed, Mattai's eyes turned fully white and the veins*

*all around them began to bulge outward. He twisted forward at the waist to evade the spear-point, even as his right hand reached behind him and grabbed the spear shaft just past the blade. He yanked the spear forward as he spun and slammed his left fist directly into the surprised bandit's jaw, dropping him to the ground. We eventually made it back to Konoha, though Mattai suffered from headaches most of the way.*

*Needless to say, after our report, there was a lot of interest in a genin that suddenly manifested a working Byakugan. The Hyuuga clan demanded an investigation of how their bloodline had been spread outside the clan. Some of this was understandable, as there had recently been an attempt to kidnap the clan head's daughter. However, Mattai had no idea where it had come from, and his parents had both been killed while traveling to Konoha. After several 'interviews' with the Hokage's office, Mattai was cleared of any wrongdoing.*

*At this point, the Hyuugas 'graciously' offered Mattai a position within the branch family.*

*However, Hiashi had not made a very favorable impression on Mattai when he first demanded to know how 'some peasant' had acquired their precious Byakugan. Also, it was whispered throughout the village that the clan leader's own twin brother, and member of the branch family, had been sacrificed the previous year to placate Kumo's demands for the life of Hiashi. Either fact was enough to make Mattai politely decline the 'honor' he had been offered. I myself was pleased with his decision – for reasons I wasn't quite ready to admit to myself.*

*Later, Kobaru-sensei told us that a motion had been filed within the council to either forcibly remove Mattai from active duty, or require him to receive the Branch Family seal - "for the good of Konoha". The measure was voted down by the rivals of the Hyuuga's, including the Uchiha and other clans. The Hokage himself would not support the motion, citing that Mattai was not a Hyuuga, and in no*

*way answered to the clan. Forcing a non-clan shinobi to join a clan or submit to their will was not a precedent he wanted to set.*

*So after a couple of months of recovery and doing D-missions while the politics played out, we were finally cleared to leave Konoha again. Tensions with Iwa had eased after a series of escalating skirmishes depleted their border guards without any measurable gain. Therefore, a simple courier job was an ideal mission to test Nomaru's recovery and allow us to work the rust from our skills.*

*We never saw the ambush coming - one moment we were traveling along a mountain path, the next moment it seemed like the entire world blew up in our faces. From the lack of warning, I think the path was mined with explosive tags.*

*The initial explosion left us scattered and wounded. I had fallen back slightly to adjust my sandal. That loose strap saved my life. Unfortunately, it also meant I had a clear view as half a dozen kunai trailing ninja wire wrapped around Kobaru-sensei. Half-stunned as he was, I don't think he even saw the explosive tags attached to the wire before they detonated, tearing Sensei to pieces.*

*That same combined explosion hurled me backwards off the path, knocking me out. But as I flew backwards, I clearly saw Nomaru decapitated by a large sword, and Mattai...*

*Mattai had volunteered to take point that day, hoping to gauge the effectiveness of his altered eyes. The explosion hurled him forward, straight into the blades of a trio of swordsmen that erupted from the ground. All three blades ripping out through his back was the last thing I saw before the darkness took me.*

*I awoke hours later at the bottom of a ravine, filthy, bruised, and quite obviously concussed. The explosion seemed to have thrown me halfway down the mountain, and that mad tumble is probably the only reason I survived. It took me hours to find the path and make it back to the ambush site. It wasn't until I saw for myself that I accepted that my teammates were all dead.*

*My memories of staggering back to Konoha were rather disjointed, owning to both my head injuries and my grief. At first, there was a lot of suspicion about what happened to my team. However, the majority of the suspicion was aimed at myself for being the sole survivor.*

*It was a long time before the Torture and Interrogation Unit cleared me of any wrongdoing. In the process, I came to know my principal interviewer well enough to share my suspicions regarding the attack.*

*Make no mistake, this was no ordinary ambush. Overwhelming force was used to intercept a courier packet of limited value. Furthermore, the precise nature of the ambush revealed a detailed knowledge of both our route and my team's composition. Finally, more men were detailed to kill a single genin than his jonin-sensei. These circumstances suggested a foul betrayal at the highest levels of Konoha's government. The courier mission was funded by the Village Council – an ordinary update typical of those sent to the Daimyo. The list of people with sufficient knowledge to have set us up was as short as it was disturbingly distinguished.*

*Privately, the man I confided in agreed with my assessment. However, he also concluded that I lacked sufficient proof to make any accusation stick. Worse, if I revealed my suspicions, it would likely only be a matter of time before I too suffered a tragic accident and was killed in action. So I held my tongue and kept my ears open, seeking the other pieces to the puzzle, hoping against hope to someday have justice for my slain comrades. Justice for a friend who might have become more some day.*

*But justice for the slain is not why I have told you of my suspicions, Naruto. My debts are not yours, and I would not see you spend your life addressing those wrongs – if that was all that this was about.*

*Ever since I returned to active duty, I kept my eyes and ears open for any hints of conspiracies or treacheries within the Leaf. Recently, those efforts have finally borne fruit. You are aware that we have noticed a pattern of villagers seeking to circumvent the Hokage's law*

*regarding your prisoner. What you may not be aware of is that some of this seems to stem from a faction within the Village Council that seeks to isolate you and place you at odds with the rest of Konoha. This is in direct opposition to the Hokage's directives regarding how you are to be treated. At best this is an attempt to undermine his authority – at worst, it is blatant treason. If you were not the type of person I am honored to call a student, they would have turned you against Konoha long ago.*

*Of course, a group willing to commit one treachery likely has committed others – such as murdering a genin to spite the Hokage for ruling against their demands.*

*I recently shared my observations, scant as they are, with one other. Umino Iruka is an eminently sensible man, and clearly has your best interests at heart. He has been assisting my investigation, and will continue if something happens to me. Please confide in him if you learn anything that you think might help.*

*Aside from seeking justice for yourself, the other reason I wish to tell you of my past is as a cautionary tale. The forces that arranged Mattai's death are quite formidable. Even with your incredible progress, it will be years before you can do much to confront or confound their schemes. Worse, you, and more importantly your teammates, are likely more vulnerable in some ways.*

*I suspect that the chief architect of Mattai's death was the same man that was stymied in his attempts to force Mattai to join the Hyuuga Branch Family and be branded with the caged bird seal – Hyuuga Hiashi, Hinata's father.*

*I do not know the man well, but nothing I have learned suggests he possesses any scruples that would have stopped him. His thirst for the Hyuuga to maintain a monopoly on their bloodline is boundless. On several occasions he has displayed a degree of ruthlessness that makes me think the worst of him.*

*At one point, Naruto, you asked me if there was something... wrong... with Hinata's family. At the time, I was bound by promises of confidentiality, and furthermore had no desire to break Hinata's trust. But with my death, I can do no more for her, and so I will answer your question. Yes, Hinata's home-life is at best abusive. I will milk her convalescence for every day that I can keep her from returning to that poisonous environment. The way Hiashi treats his daughter is monstrous, and I would like nothing better than to see him rot in hell for that alone.*

*As best I can tell, her missions with Team Eight, and especially her training with you, are the sole bright spots in her existence. Please look out for her Naruto. I know you are devoted to both your teammates, but Shino has a supportive family and a girl I would be proud to call daughter has nothing. If you are reading this, then I am dead, and can do nothing further to help her. It is not fair of me to do this, to lay this geas upon you, but desperation makes tyrants of us all. My only solace is that I can see how you care for her, even if you do not realize it yourself. You may not be able to recognize it because of how you have been treated all your life (and I damn the Council once again for that), but she is just as clearly devoted to you. She loves you, Naruto, like she loves no one else in this life. Treasure that, and treasure her. Please.*

*Protect her from her father. Protect yourself from all the forces arrayed against you. These are nigh unto impossible tasks. But you do have a few allies. The Hokage cannot show overt favoritism, but he has displayed a willingness to assist you when he can. I've already mentioned Iruka. Your oafish Godfather, while he has done things I disapprove of, does have his reasons. He will help you, within his own limitations. Finally, your teammates will give emotional support, even if they are unable to help in more tangible ways. I would give anything for five minutes with my lost friends. I only hope to see them again some day.*

*Again, I apologize for the burdens my death has forced me to shift onto your shoulders. I am comforted by the knowledge that the future*

*Hokage of Konoha will have the strength to do what I was unable to manage. You convinced me of your destiny the first time we talked at Moritake's, Naruto. But know that I am already proud to have had you as a student, and as a friend. I am sure that you will become one of the greatest Hokages.*

*-Kurenai*

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Tsunade's inauguration as the Godaime Hokage was a relatively subdued affair. The village was still repairing damage from the aborted invasion, and the guest of honor didn't exactly feel like celebrating the assumption of a job she didn't really want. To Tsunade, becoming Hokage meant dealing with a series of headaches... such as the clan leader raising his voice in her office.

"I understand your concerns, Hiashi, but the bargain was struck before I ever agreed to return to Konoha," she began in what she hoped was a placating tone. Obnoxious as he was, the fool wielded a lot of influence with the council and the Daimyo. "Furthermore, her duties will now facilitate plans I and my predecessor have devised to improve medic-nin training."

"While my heir is needed to fulfill certain duties within the clan," Hiashi began smoothly after making a visible effort to calm himself, "I doubt she would be of much use in such a... sensitive capacity. You would do far better to utilize someone with natural ability in that area."

"I think you misunderstand me, Hiashi-sama," Tsunade replied with a smile. The old fool had stepped right into her trap. "That's precisely what I don't want. I have been away from Konoha for many years, and I understand that the... quality... of the Academy graduates may have changed over the years. Hinata's efforts to learn medical jutsu, no matter how fruitless, will give me a yardstick with which to calibrate the training times for the actual program. If I used someone who actually possessed any talent, it would skew all of the results.

No, Hinata's 'all-around mediocrity', as you have described it, is exactly what I need."

"I... see," Hiashi said after a long pause. It was clear that he really didn't. It was also clear that he didn't want to admit that fact. "And after she fails the program?" he asked.

"That won't be allowed," Tsunade answered in a firm tone. "I'll work her into the ground if I have to, but I will get my full six months of service. If nothing else, it will teach her to bargain with greater care in the future."

"I suppose it might," Hiashi allowed in a slightly approving tone. "I have already expressed my displeasure with her actions, but I will leave it to you to demonstrate the true foolishness of her offer."

"As you wish, Hiashi-sama," Tsunade agreed. She didn't quite simper – not even this fool was egotistical enough to fall for that.

No sooner had he left than the side door to Tsunade's tower quarters opened and a scowling Shizune strode in. Anticipating many late nights working, Tsunade had asked her apprentice to unpack there, rather than airing out the Senju clan residence. She raised an eyebrow at her senior apprentice's thunderous expression... right up until she saw Hinata shuffling in behind her, eyes downcast.

"Oh hell," she groaned internally. Their voices must have carried through the door. From what Jiraiya had passed on, she was sure the girl's hopes had been crushed.

Might as well brazen it out, she decided. "Now that the idiot is gone," she began, "I can tell you my real expectations. I am going to work you hard, and you are going to be an incredible Medic-nin, understand me?"

Now the girl looked confused, but that was at least an improvement. And Shizune didn't look at her like she'd crawled out from under a rock anymore. "I told your father what he wanted to hear in order to

get him out of my office. Killing a clan leader in my first week as Hokage sets a bad precedent," she announced breezily. "Your chakra control is almost as good as mine when I was your age, and you have at least twice the stamina I did. What the hell kind of training did Hiashi have you doing?"

"Ah," Hinata began, looking like her head was spinning from having her expectations flipped around, "I, uh, believe most of that was from training with N-Naruto."

"Really?" Tsunade asked, smirking, "and what kind of training is that?"

Hinata blushed suddenly, and Tsunade felt a twinge of guilt. This kid was really too easy to wind up. "Mostly Taijutsu sparring. S-some chakra control exercises too. We also w-work with Gai-sama and his student Rock Lee."

Tsunade vaguely remembered hearing Maito Gai's name some years ago. Something about a genin who passed his Jonin-sensei's personal test by the simple expedient of wearing him out to the point of acute exhaustion. "Well, whatever you're doing you should continue if you can."

The shy Hyuuga's expression immediately brightened at that.

"You'll spend the afternoons working with Shizune at first, and assisting her with her rounds at the hospital," the Hokage continued. "At some point, provided you are progressing adequately, you will be assigned to other teams or to ad hoc groups for support. This will give you experience working with a variety of personalities and skill-sets."

"What about Team Eight?" Hyuuga Hinata asked with a frown.

Tsunade sighed. "Officially, it was dissolved with the death of Yuuhi Kurenai. However, all three of you are performing at or near Chuunin level already, so it doesn't make a lot of sense to re-assign you to

genin teams that have lost a member. You would unbalance them, and they'd just have to replace you again when you were promoted." She paused. "I'll be working out individual solutions for your teammates, just as I have for you. Understood?"

"Hai, Hokage-sama."

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"I appreciate you and your wife's flexibility on this issue, Shibi," Tsunade said with a smile.

"Your request was only logical," the Aburame replied in even tones. "Shino's personal development is best served by specialized instruction, but his professional advancement is best served by working with a group. And what better group than individuals he is already accustomed to working with?"

"I agree, but with the scheduling issues he may not be able to complete missions with them as frequently as before. It might also be good to get him used to working with some of the other genin teams."

"Your point is well taken, but financially, he is not as dependent as others upon his mission income." A pause. "He has also invested a good portion of his earnings, with an eye toward long-term returns."

"That's... prudent," Tsunade nodded, slightly taken aback. How much had those brats made on missions already? "But from what I understand, very typical for Shino."

"We are pleased with his development as well," Shibi agreed.

---

"Look Tsunade, I'll get right to the point," Jiraiya began. "I want Naruto as my apprentice."

"Okay."

"I know I haven't been here for him growing up like I should have been," the old lecher admitted with a grimace, "but I'd heard some ugly rumors that needed chasing down, and I thought the Old Man had things under control. Well, now I know better, and I can't leave him alone."

"Okay."

"I've got a lot of things I can teach him, things he needs to learn," Jiraiya continued, clearly not listening yet. "His father's jutsu, for one thing. And maybe how to get a handle on the Fox's chakra without hurting himself."

"Okay," Tsunade replied, her teeth starting to grind.

"I know you don't think much of my sense of responsibility," Jiraiya plowed on, "but he's my Godson. And I made a promise to his Jonin-sensei as well. I-"

"DAMMIT JIRAIYA, I SAID YES! NOW SHUT UP BEFORE I KILL YOU!" Tsunade yelled.

The Toad Hermit was gone before the Chuunin guard even got the door open.

---

Naruto looked up from his instant ramen. "Could you repeat that again, please?" he asked in a subdued voice.

Jiraiya frowned as he leaned back from the kitchen table. "I said, the Hokage has assigned you as my apprentice."

"Exactly what does that mean?"

Jiraiya's frown deepened. Most genin would give their left arm to train under someone as awesome as the Toad Hermit. Why would *his godson* act like it's a punishment detail? "It means, you will be getting one-on-one instruction with *me.* I have a lot to teach you,

things I doubt you've even heard of. We'll be doing some missions together, and I'll show you what it takes to develop and maintain the biggest covert intelligence network in the elemental countries."

"Missions?" Naruto asked, "but what about Team Eight?"

Jiraiya let out a sigh. "Naruto, Team Eight officially ceased to exist when... you know."

Naruto scowled. Jiraiya noticed a muscle twitching along his jawline... just like Minato, on the rare occasion when his former student got really angry.

"That's the official rule," Jiraiya continued. "You can't have a genin team without a jonin-sensei. Unofficially, you three are as much genin as I am a celibate monk. Anyone reading your files knows how well you three work together, so you'll probably be called together for missions on a regular basis."

Jiriaya took a sip of his tea as Naruto subsided a little. He hadn't promised, not explicitly, but he wasn't comfortable drinking what he really wanted to... not in front of the kid. She may have had a stick up her ass, but he didn't want to dishonor what was effectively a last request. Too much bad karma, especially for someone in his line of work. "You know, if the exam hadn't been interrupted, you and maybe Shino would have made Chuunin for sure – and your *genin* team would have been split up. That said, most Chuunin have mission profiles they are better at, and people they are used to working with. That's why you tend to see the same shinobi working together from time to time, no matter what their rank is."

Naruto looked thoughtful. "So... this kind of thing would have happened anyway. But we'll still end up working together a lot. That's why she asked me to promise..."

"Promise?" Jiraiya asked.

Naruto looked down at his steaming cup. "To look after my teammates."

Jiraiya squelched a flash of irritation. Kurenai really had no business laying that kind of burden on a genin. He wondered if she'd done it for other reasons. Maybe to focus someone who was a hell-raiser in the Academy, according to his files. He'd never know. "She knew how the system works, Naruto. I'm sure she meant when you all were on missions together. Anyway, it looks like you've got everything here squared away, so we're going on a training trip in two days. Pack for an extended mission with resupply en route."

"Extended mission?" Naruto asked. "How long?"

"About six months," Jiraiya said. "I need to introduce you to my contacts, so we'll be moving around a lot at first. I also have some advanced jutsu for you to work on..."

"Six months?" Naruto exclaimed. "But... I can't..."

"If this has anything to do with the Hyuuga girl," Jiraiya continued, "You wouldn't be seeing much of her anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"Remember that six months of service she owes the Hokage?" Jiriaya asked. "She still owes it, and Tsunade's going to get her money's worth. Between making her learn medical jutsu and working at the hospital... well, she's going to work her so hard that she'll be sleeping on a cot in Shizune's room at the tower."

Naruto scowled at first, then his face cleared as he made the connection. Jiriaya couldn't fault the kid's reasoning ability, but his poker face needed a lot of work. "I see," the blond said after a moment. "And Shino?"

"He'll be working with his mother and father on their techniques, when he's not doing missions. Tsunade said something about

socializing him, so I think he may tag along with some of the other teams on missions to get him used to working with more than just you and the Hyuuga."

"Two days from now?" Naruto asked. His expression indicated acceptance, if not agreement. That would have to do.

Jiraiya nodded.

Naruto sighed. "All right. That will give me time to say goodbye."

---

Naruto wasn't specifically looking for Iruka-sensei when he ran across him in the business district, but he had been going around and making his goodbyes to the few people that would actually miss him. Ikitaro the tailor even sold him some spare fabric he could use to patch his uniforms if he managed to damage the tough fabric in the field.

He was about to call out to his old Academy instructor when he noticed the slightly furtive air about the chuunin as he hurriedly made his way down the street, rifling through a stack of papers.

Naruto paused, wondering if this had something to do with what Kurenai had mentioned in her letter. He hoped not – especially if it was supposed to be secret. Fortunately, Iruka wasn't dumb either.

He was, however, very distracted, and didn't notice Naruto tailing him through the crowded streets of the district. The little lessons he'd picked up from Kurenai-sensei were second nature by now. Don't make eye contact. Don't maintain a constant distance. Do vary your course so it only roughly parallels the target. It was too bad he didn't have anyone else to switch off with to better avoid detection. Fortunately, detection wasn't an issue. Normally, Iruka-sensei was more on the ball than this, so Naruto knew he had to be pretty worked up over something.

This was a good thing, because Naruto completely broke his tradecraft when he saw Iruka duck into a store… that sold fancy ladies underwear.

Naruto immediately checked himself for signs of a genjutsu – even pulsing his chakra for a bare instant at the lowest power he could manage. No resistance. Shaking his head in disbelief, Naruto ducked into an alleyway and henged into the form of an attractive younger woman, who then sauntered up to the shop and lingered near the doorway as she inspected the display models in the window.

He felt vaguely perverted staring at the lacy bits of fabric on display. None of it looked even remotely comfortable, and he didn't even want to think of what Jiraiya would say if he could see him now. But for the most part, his attention was focused on his hearing, and the faint voices drifting from within.

An older female voice was winding up the end of a formal greeting to… Iruka-sama? What the hell?

"I, uh, received a flyer in the mail, regarding the… you-know," Iruka began hesitantly.

"Oh yes, Iruka-sama, do not worry, we will have workmen here tomorrow to replace the sign." Naruto glanced up at the sign over the door. Pandora's Secret. "I have completed all of the other paperwork, including renewing the business licenses with the new name." There was a rustle of paper. "I will have everything taken care of for our grand re-opening next week."

"No! I mean, I think you misunderstood, Hotako-san, I meant that it was supposed to remain a secr-"

"I've already mailed flyers to all our regular customers," the old lady continued, giving no sign of having heard Iruka at all. Maybe she was hard of hearing?

"Oh no," Iruka gasped.

"Oh, it's all right, Iruka-sama," she consoled the chuunin, "none of those I've talked to seemed at all upset. This has been Pandora's Secret for over twenty years now, it was time for a change. And the new name… it's just a little hint of naughty, you know, it makes the older women smile and the younger women blush. You should make sure you are here for the grand re-opening sale, Iruka-sama. A nice young man like yourself, it's a crime you don't have a girlfriend or three… maybe that's why when you lowered the rent you wanted the shop to become Iruka's Secret?" She asked in a sly tone.

"No!" Iruka burst out, "I meant it was supposed to stay a secret… I… Oh, uh, nevermind, Hotako-san, I, uh, need to get to my appointment. I'll see you later!"

"Oh, I need to get a picture! For the sign, you know…"

Naruto had to step quickly to the side to avoid being bowled over by the fleeing chuunin. Feeling merciful, Naruto followed the fleeing shinobi for half a block before calling out his name.

Iruka froze in place as Naruto dropped the henge. The chuunin had an embarrassed smile on his face as he turned around.

Naruto didn't say anything. He just raised an eyebrow. The fact that Kurenai-sensei would do the same thing when she caught him doing something foolish gave him a pang, but thankfully the pain was starting to dull. He'd like to think she'd appreciate how he was handling this.

"This is all your fault, you know," Iruka blurted out.

Naruto just looked at him silently.

Iruka sighed. "I probably should explain," he finally said. "You want to go to Ichiraku's?" he asked.

Naruto nodded happily.

"My treat," Iruka added.

Naruto froze as a chill went down his spine. Something was wrong.

---

Of course, all things are relative, especially when you are wrapped around several warm servings of miso ramen.

"Wait," Naruto interjected, "I knew you made a lot of money betting on the finals. Did you invest in an underwear store? And you called me a pervert for Sexy no Jutsu when I was your student!"

Iruka sputtered. "It wasn't like that at all! We just… ah… well, nearly bankrupted several of the Hyuuga Elders."

Naruto's eyebrows went up. "They bet that much?" he asked.

"We got very, very good odds," Iruka explained with some satisfaction. "And they definitely didn't want it to get around that they couldn't pay their debts. So some of the compensation came in the form of assets."

"Assets?" Naruto asked.

"Liens, debts owed by third parties, and the deeds to various properties around Konoha," Iruka explained.

"Ah, so that's why you now own a panty store?" Naruto asked in a loud voice, making Iruka cringe visibly.

"Hush Naruto," the chuunin snapped, "or I won't pay for your ramen."

Naruto grinned. "Okay, okay," he agreed in a quieter voice, "but if you are so embarrassed, why did you have that old lady change the name?"

"I didn't," Iruka protested, "I saw how she was getting overcharged a little on her rent, especially compared to the other shops on that block, so we renegotiated."

"Ayame and I don't have time to worry about other businesses," Teuchi added as he refilled Iruka's bowl. "Iruka-san was nice enough to take on most of the non-liquid assets as part of his share."

Iruka looked down. "It's only fair," he protested. "I'm the one that didn't think to stipulate cash only when they settled up."

Teuchi waved that off with a ladle. "From what I understand, that would have just made you look suspicious in their eyes."

"Besides," Ayame added as she carried a stack of dirty bowls to the sink, where a short girl with long, curly brown hair was up to her arms in soapy water. "Shinobi acquiring a business get a small tax break on the purchase." When they'd arrived at Ichiraku's, Naruto had learned that business had increased so much since the invasion that Teuchi had to hire Ayame's friend, Aldraia, to help part-time with the cleaning.

Iruka shrugged. "The law is supposed to make it easier for ninja to retire when they get too old for active duty or if they are permanently injured."

"So you gave her a break on the rent if she named the store after you?" Naruto asked, getting back to his original question.

"No, no," Iruka protested. "I just asked her to let it be our little secret. I didn't think her rent was fair, but I didn't want every business owner trying to renegotiate their lease. But I don't think she understood me. Her store was originally named Pandora's Secret and instead of leaving me out of it, she renamed it to Iruka's Secret." His shoulders slumped as Ayame doubled over in peals of laughter.

Naruto smiled as he looked away. He had just the picture to make a copy of for Hotako-san.

The former Team Eight met at Moritake's the night before Naruto and Jiriaya were to depart. Surprisingly, Naruto had suggested the more up-scale restaurant, having bid goodbye to Ichiraku's the day before. The owner was quiet when the genin entered, but he accompanied the server that brought their food, carrying a small bottle of sake. The bottle of high-quality rice wine contained just enough for four saucers and a toast to absent friends. One saucer was left, untouched, in front of an empty chair. Naruto was a little startled when the retired shinobi poured out the fourth serving, but his silent nod was all it took for him to make the connection.

Naruto barely noticed the taste.

The conversation over their food was awkward and stilted. There was a lot that needed to be said, but no one seemed to be able to find the words. Finally, Shino broke the silence that had descended.

"I find myself surprised at how uncomfortable this meeting has become," he observed. "Prior to graduating from the Academy, I would not have considered this interaction strained, since it served little true purpose. However, since joining Team Eight, my standards for social interaction have risen accordingly."

Naruto shrugged. "In other words, you've gotten used to dealing with us."

"That is factually correct," Shino allowed, "but insufficient. I have... raised my expectations for what would constitute a satisfactory interaction, and I find the current situation less than acceptable. This is especially true given the company in which I find myself."

"We are usually... more comfortable... around each other," Hinata agreed.

"It's hard to find something to talk about," Naruto admitted, "at least without bringing up..."

"Kurenai-sensei's death." Shino finished for him.

"Yeah," Naruto replied as Hinata frowned a little.

Shino nodded. "I am of two minds regarding this issue. On the one hand, I feel privileged to have known her. On the other, I find her absence most disturbing. I expected to go through the normal grieving process and arrive at a nominal psychological equilibrium. Instead, I find myself snapping back to earlier stages at seemingly random times. It is most vexing."

"I'm doing the same thing, Shino," Hinata added quietly. "This... happened... after my mother died. I think it's normal to be this way."

"It doesn't help that they are splitting us up," Naruto groused.

"The Hokage's reasoning is sound," Shino replied. "Our development would best be served by individual instruction at this point."

"Maybe I don't care about that!" Naruto snarled. "I don't want to follow some path like a puppet. I want to be packing up for another extended recon patrol. I want to look forward to Hinata's deer skewers. I want to get bored and spar with you after we set up camp for the night. I want to meet new people that don't... look at me. I want..."

"You want to sit around the fire and listen to one of Kurenai-sensei's stories and try to pick out the hidden lesson," Shino finished for him.

Naruto closed his eyes as they prickled with hot, un-shed tears. He just nodded, not trusting his voice.

The silence dragged on until Hinata softly cleared her throat. "M-maybe when you return from your trip, Naruto, we can request a patrol mission together. We would need practice working together again, right?"

"It would be wise if we were allowed an opportunity to incorporate any newly-acquired skills into our teamwork," Shino agreed. "And we will likely have stories of our individual tasks to share."

Naruto opened his eyes and smiled at Hinata. "I think that's a great idea."

---

When told about Naruto's new assignment, Gai-sensei had requested they meet briefly before Naruto left with the toad hermit. Naruto was used to getting up at the crack of dawn, and Jiraiya most decidedly was *not* – so it wasn't really any imposition at all.

On the other hand, given the green-clad jonin's eccentricities, Naruto was bracing himself for a battle royale to "test the fires of his youth before he left on his youthful training trip".

The fact that those very words sprung to mind with no effort worried Naruto more than he cared to admit.

Instead of seeing Lee, or maybe even Ten Ten warming up, Naruto found Maito Gai alone in the clearing. His mood was unusually somber, which also put Naruto on edge.

"Thank you for coming," Gai said in a formal-sounding tone that was at odds with his usual diction. "There is something I wish to discuss with you."

Naruto nodded slowly.

"Immediately after the Chuunin examinations," Gai began, "I asked your teacher about your training. I noticed you using a technique, Swamp of the Underworld, to great effect in your victory over Neji."

Naruto felt rather uncomfortable now. He and Neji had not spoken since that confrontation at Ichiraku's, but Hinata had hinted that her relations with her cousin had changed in a major way. That didn't

mean he was comfortable discussing the fight with the boy's sensei – especially with how viciously it seemed to end.

But Gai continued on heedlessly. "It was not hard to realize you had learned that from Jiraiya-sama, but I was curious regarding any other techniques you might have acquired. Jiraiya is best known as Konoha's Toad Summoner, and I was curious if he had taught you that as well."

Naruto frowned in confusion.

"Since the exams were concluded, she confided in me that you had declined to sign the Toad Contract, due to concerns regarding how they might… interact… with your teammate, Aburame-san," Gai continued. "Is this still a concern?"

Naruto nodded slowly. Jiraiya hadn't brought it up again, but Naruto still felt it was a possible issue if he ever took missions with Shino again in the future.

"I see," Gai replied, smiling a little. "That brings me to my current situation. Certain contracts have non-youthful requirements. For example, in Konoha, the Toads are well known for requiring a prospective summoner share a drink with the Boss Toad, Gamabunta. This is quite the spectacle as you can imagine."

Naruto's mouth dropped open a little. For Maito Gai to consider it to be… He shuddered.

"I hold the Turtle Contract, as the Chief Summoner," Gai continued, not noticing. "One of my youthful duties, as outlined in the contract, is to make sure that each generation includes at least one Chief Summoner with the ability to summon their leader. The turtles have legends of the end of the world, and the role they will play in it, so they must always be capable of coming here to prevent it." The last was said with a more normal Gai gusto to it, snapping Naruto out of his shock.

"I have worked extensively with my youthful students," Gai admitted sadly, "but none of them show a strong desire to master the summoning arts. Lee is, of course, dedicated to taijutsu and becoming a Genius of Hard Work ™. Neji is focused on perfecting the Hyuuga Way of the Gentle Fist, and Ten Ten is walking the path of the marksman, and dedicating herself to weapons mastery. Therefore," he concluded, "I will have to seek elsewhere to find a fitting Chief Summoner in the next generation of Shinobi."

Naruto blinked.

"You have nearly equaled Lee's fires of youth when it comes to your dedication to training," Gai continued, "and you have the chakra reserves necessary to someday summon the Friend of All Children." Gai abruptly held up his hand as Naruto opened his mouth to speak. "I have also made inquiries regarding the other issue. Most of the turtles are herbivores, and the ones that do eat insects do not do so in quite the… reflexive… way the toads do. There should not be an issue, and I myself have worked with Aburame shinobi in the past with no… un-youthful… issues."

Naruto blinked. The normally overenthusiastic jonin had really thought everything through. He also realized the great honor he'd been offered, especially after Kurenai had made him apologize profusely to Jiraiya – even if Naruto wouldn't change his mind. "I would be honored to sign the Turtle Contract, Gai-Sensei. What other requirements should I be aware of?" he asked delicately.

He just hoped green leotards weren't part of the deal.

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Naruto practiced the seals in his mind as he waited for Jiraiya next to the gate. The sequence wasn't particularly long for summoning. It was more the chakra flow and how it was modulated that determined who you pulled.

There was also a lot of memorization to connect chakra signatures with names and abilities. Such details were far too sensitive to be

committed to paper, so Gai-sensei verbally gave him a list of the basic tier to memorize, and suggested he summon the higher ones individually and meet with each one. They could tell him about their immediate superiors, and this would also help fix them in his mind, as well as let him get used to their individual quirks. It seemed that almost every summon creature was an individual, no matter the contract. Just some contracts had more individual variation than others.

Of course, the Turtles were as individualistic as they could get – especially since they were, by nature, usually solitary. On the other hand, almost all of the snakes were cold-blooded jerks, at least according to Jiraiya.

It wasn't too long before the white-haired shinobi ambled up to the gate, but he wasn't alone. Shino stepped forward first, clasping Naruto's hand firmly. "I will await your return," was all he said. Naruto nodded.

Hinata was a little hesitant, but inside Naruto was proud of how she straightened up and squarely met his eyes. He thought about what Kurenai had written about his teammate and swallowed. Without a pause he stepped forward and hugged the girl, closing his eyes as he squeezed and pressed his face into the side of her neck. He inhaled a little, to remember the faint smell of sweat, kunai oil, and medicinal herbs coming from her jacket. "Stay strong," he whispered into her ear, his lips unmoving.

She was frozen, seemingly in shock, but his words must have registered because she locked her arms around his shoulders with surprising force, almost squeezing the breath out of him. She held on for a moment before she released him, stepping back self-consciously.

Naruto smiled at them both as he stepped back as well. No more needed to be said.

"All right, Naruto," Jiraiya demanded in a rough voice. Naruto was pretty sure he had a hangover. "We got a long way to go before it gets dark."

Naruto nodded. With a last wave to the rest of Team Eight, he joined Jiraiya and slipped through the village gate.

Author Notes:

Greetings and salutations! Circumstances allowed me some time to actually make some progress, and work out some of the issues in this tale, not the least of which is a gag that was planned since chapter 1. Some backstory is revealed and readers will likely have a better idea of where this AU diverged from canon. Thanks go out to Runsamok for awesome beta work, and Tempest Kitsune and Torbin for additional commentary and encouragement.

There is a discussion thread on the Viridian Dreams forums.

# Servants, Sparring, and Summons

Chapter 23

Six months. A little over a hundred eighty days. Jiraiya sighed as he and his new apprentice made their way down the forest trail. It wasn't nearly enough.

When he first entertained thoughts of taking Naruto on a training trip, he was picturing a sabbatical of three or so years. Enough time to work at a reasonable pace. Enough time to introduce new subjects one at a time, to let the brat work at his own pace. He didn't want to be rushed. While it wouldn't hurt to have time for some *leisure activities* and maybe a bit of writing, he also wanted a chance to get to know his godson.

Three years also might give them time to disappear from Akatsuki's radar - or at least figure out what the hell they were up to.

Instead, he asked for a fraction of the time he really wanted. Naruto was hesitant enough to leave the village for six months, and Jiraiya knew he would balk at longer. As it was, he was surprised Tsunade agreed as easily as she did. Maybe it worked out with her plans for the Hyuuga girl. It also meant being back just in time for the next Chuunin Examination, and maybe get the boy the promotion he'd been cheated out of. Finally, Hinata would be busy training under Tsunade, and more importantly, isolated from her father. Knowing that kept the brat agreeable. The Toad Hermit knew heartbreak well enough not to wish it on anyone else.

Jiraiya shook his head. There was so much he wanted, no, *needed* to teach the brat. Of course, the list was a little shorter than it might have been, he mused sourly, ignoring the stab of disappointment in his gut. He'd hoped to convince Naruto to go ahead and sign the toad contract anyway, now that he wasn't on a team with the Aburame anymore. That hope was dashed less than an hour away

from Konoha, when he first broached the subject. It was irrational, but he couldn't help but feel betrayed when the little snot announced that he'd signed the turtle contract. He ground his teeth. Turtles!

That sense of betrayal dulled a little when he realized that Naruto still considered himself a part of Team 8, and probably always would. He couldn't really resent that… it's not like he didn't still have feelings, unresolved or not, for his own teammates. Tsunade could have anything from him if she asked sincerely, and Orochimaru… that betrayal still burned in his soul. Worse, if Yuuhi Kurenai was correct, Team 8 were Naruto's first friends his age.

And that was his own fault, he supposed. He'd accepted Sarutobi-sensei's assurances and done what was best for Konoha, instead of what was best for his godson. Not that it was all the old man's fault either. His own grief made him far too quick to accept a long term assignment. Watching over a baby was far beyond his skills, let alone a baby with Minato's hair color and Kushina's mouth and jawline. But he could have done it. The boy survived, but he could have personally made sure Naruto had someone to turn to as he grew up. Instead, he failed him just as badly as the Hokage and most of the other villagers. Like all the other so-called fucking adults in Konoha, until his last Academy instructor and that kami-sent jonin-sensei. With an effort, he worked to let go of his regrets and focused on the positives.

Yuuhi Kurenai was one of the most irritating women Jiraiya had ever met, and he considered Tsunade a friend so that was saying a lot. But damned if she wasn't exactly what Naruto needed. Her students didn't exactly worship the ground she walked on, but it was close with Naruto and the Hyuuga girl, Hinata. When she called him onto the carpet after discovering he was Naruto's godfather, he let her do it because she was right. She'd done a better job of godparent than Naruto's own godfather, so she earned that right. No matter Hokage's orders or the threat of Akatsuki, she was the one who stepped up and put his godson on the right path. There was no telling how messed up Naruto would be now if not for her.

That was why he was going to honor her requests. Every single silly one. No sake for six months might very well kill him, in which case her afterlife was going to be a constant litany of "I told you so", sung by a celestial toad chorus.

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Shizune wasn't quite sure what to make of her new kouhai, or junior student. She'd been impressed that anyone, let alone a Hyuuga, was willing to give up so much for a teammate. She knew Tsunade would never hold her to that vow. Managing herself, Shizune, and Ton-Ton was as much responsibility as the Sannin could bear, but Hinata had no way of knowing that when she bargained for Naruto's treatment.

Of course, that surprise was dwarfed by a recovered patient tricking her master into returning to Konoha. Well, the Legendary Sucker losing a bet wasn't surprising, but a genin maneuvering her into a situation where her horrible luck, or horrible temper, played against her? That was new. And now she would be working with his best friend. Eldest daughter of the leader of the prestigious Hyuuga clan. Who willingly placed herself in indentured servitude for six months to heal a clan-less orphan? She was still trying to wrap her head around that one.

The first day of anatomy review, Shizune was surprised by how focused the younger girl was. The lack of squeamishness she supposed might have been fostered by the stoic Hyuuga upbringing. Genin that hadn't been blooded in warfare usually showed more reaction when viewing internal organs for the first time. Maybe she was used to seeing them with her Byakugan. But that didn't explain how Shizune was the first to call for a break after five hours of intensive review. She fully expected Hinata to show some signs of fatigue or wandering attention before then. But the girl was eerily calm and focused on her words the entire time. It was unnerving. And when it came time to review, Hinata repeated everything back, nearly word-for-word. And then she asked questions. They were good questions, building on what she'd been shown, but not the kind of questions Shizune was expecting so soon.

After a week of this, she spoke to Tsunade. Whatever reaction she was expecting from her sensei, and now Hokage, it wasn't an aggravated frown and a long-suffering sigh.

"Hokage-sama?" she asked in as respectful a tone as possible.

"I'm going to kill Jiraiya," she growled.

That was far from the first time Shizune had heard those words, but for once she couldn't see how this could possibly be the Toad Hermit's fault. "What did he do?" she finally asked.

Tsunade sighed. "It's karma. I made fun of him one too many times when we met up after he started teaching Minato fuuinjutsu… I laughed at how perturbed he was to realize that he was teaching someone who would surpass him. Now it's going to happen to me. Eventually, anyway."

Shizune blinked. "Uh, what makes you say that?" While Shizune herself had a lot of expertise with poisons, Tsunade was widely acknowledged as the foremost medical expert ever born. Even people that hated her acknowledged her skill.

Tsunade opened her desk drawer and fished out a bottle. "It's practically a perfect combination. Hinata has developed ridiculous stamina for her age and gender, her chakra control is in the top percentile, and it's water-natured. Those damn eyes of hers are a diagnostician's dream, and now you tell me she has the brains for it as well. And as for motivation," she grimaced as she broke the seal on the bottle, then continued, "I asked her, on the way back to Konoha, why she agreed to be my servant. Do you know what she said?"

Shizune shook her head.

"She said that some of the worst moments of her life were watching Naruto suffering when she couldn't help him," Tsunade said. "That is not the answer I would expect, given some of the things I've heard

about her father, but there it was… best damn motivation to go into medicine that I ever heard of."

Shizune silently watched her master take a drink, but shook her head when offered a sip. She didn't really even have the heart to remonstrate her about it. It was late, and she did not often hear Tsunade so engrossed in the problems of others. It was, she felt, a change for the better.

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A clash of metal sent sparks dancing before Shino dropped back into a guard stance, kamas at the ready. Tenten grinned as she spun the butterfly swords in her hands.

He had seen the weapon specialist from Team Gai perform in the preliminary matches of the last chuunin examination. Unfortunately, she had an extremely poor match-up with a Suna wind-user that resulted in a quick elimination. He hadn't thought about her again until Hinata brought it up during one of their 'team lunches'. It was not the same without the presence of Uzumaki Naruto, but he had no desire to lose contact with his remaining teammate.

His absence also allowed for a slightly more varied choice in lunchtime fare.

Hinata was still getting up early each day and working with Gai and Lee on both physical conditioning and taijutsu. The improvements in both strength and agility were subtle, but the expansions to her chakra capacity were clearly evident to his allies. Merely sitting in close proximity would stir his hives as they sensed the foreign chakra. In idle moments Shino sometimes wondered, if circumstances were different, if this might have translated into a physical and/or emotional attraction. Not that this was in any way a fruitful topic to pursue.

It was during one of these morning sessions that Tenten arrived for a little live target practice with Lee and Hinata. As they were cooling down afterward, Tenten lamented a lack of qualified sparring

partners. Hinata knew from previous conversations that Shino was also seeking more weapon stylists to practice against. It wasn't long before the two met with live steel in their hands.

While Tenten wanted to master multiple weapons, Shino was only interested in practicing the kama techniques he had learned from his mother. It still worked out well for both, since his time was split between weapons practice and working with his kikai bugs. Tenten got to work out with a variety of weapons, and Shino got to practice defending against a variety of weapons.

Not that this was in any way easy.

After replacing his jacket for the fifth time, his mother insisted Shino be fitted for a reinforced model. Ikitaro of Wave, the tailor that improved Naruto's uniform, was more than happy to have Shino try out some new concepts for his new Shinobi-Wear ™ line. Now his jacket had leather strips sewn under the outer edges of his forearms and upper arms, with a single link of fine chakra-treated chain imbedded. It would likely part under a direct hit, but it might slow the hypothetical blade down enough to prevent amputation. Shino did know that it cut down on the nicks and excessive wear and tear that free sparring was placing on his wardrobe. It was also light enough to not slow him down, so he asked for similar treatment on his trousers. The material being fire-retardant was a further bonus.

He could also say, with some veracity, that he could make it exceedingly difficult for anyone to score a direct hit on him.

Practicing with Tenten also yielded a secondary benefit. It gave him a much-needed distraction when he was assigned to work with Team Gai for a mission. It was disturbing to discover that Naruto's depictions of the assorted Fires of Youth antics were not actually exaggerated in any way. When there was sufficient leisure time for Gai and Lee to start exclaiming, the rest of them quickly sought any possible form of distraction.

To be honest, things were rather tense at first between himself and Hyuuga Neji. Unlike Naruto, Shino had been denied any cathartic release from the issues that arose during the chuunin exam. Initially, the only thing staying his hand was a desire to remain professional and bring no shame to the teachings of his former sensei. The second was Hinata's testimony during a shared luncheon that her cousin had turned over a new leaf.

The final factor was Hyuuga Neji himself. He was unusually taciturn during their first mission together. It was a simple D-rank requested 'so they could all get to know each other', as Maito Gai put it. However, Neji's behavior lacked some of the haughtiness that Shino had expected. Furthermore, at the end of their day, Neji bowed and asked Shino if he was in contact with Hinata. When Shino nodded, Neji asked, in the most humble manner possible, if he could delay leaving for a moment and do him a favor. Shino acceded to this request mainly out of curiosity. He was intrigued when Neji pulled out writing supplies and penned a quick note to his cousin, then asked Shino if he would mind giving it to Hinata at his earliest opportunity.

Hinata herself was very happy to receive the missive, and was nearly reduced to tears by the news from her home. She asked Shino if he minded relaying a reply, and of course he agreed. Curiously, Neji read the reply twice over, then set it alight with a regretful frown and composed his own missive. There were three repetitions of this cycle before Shino broke down and asked Neji why he destroyed Hinata's messages. The somewhat chilling answer was that Neji could not afford for Hiashi to see one of them and know he was in contact with Hinata.

Fortunately, Shino's missions with Team Ten were less stressful. While Sarutobi Asuma was far more laissez-faire than Shino was used to, Chouji continued the friendliness displayed after their match during the chuunin exam and Shikamaru was a stimulating conversationalist. The less said about Ino the better. While superficially attractive, Shino found himself comparing her to Hinata

in a singularly unfavorable fashion. Sometimes, he wondered if he was measuring the blond genin by an unreasonable standard.

Team Seven was another matter. They had worked together well in the Forest of Death, under very adverse circumstances. However, Uchiha Sasuke displayed signs of intense unease when Shino was around. Finally, Sakura took it upon herself to explain that Sasuke tended to take responsibility for events far beyond the scope of his capabilities. Specifically, he felt uneasy because of his brother Itachi and the role the rogue ninja played in Kurenai-sensei's death. Shino was somewhat offended that he was believed capable of such irrational blaming behavior and made that clear to the last Uchiha. After that, they settled into an uneasy détente, united in their mutual desire to end Itachi, but ultimately competing to see who would have the honor of achieving that goal.

It also did not help that their sensei appeared to derive no small pleasure in pitting him against Sasuke or Kiba whenever the opportunity arose. At least his… observations. Not rants. Rants were irrational. His observations, shared with Hinata during their shared meals, seemed to provide no small amount of entertainment for his teammate.

And they were far more appropriate meal time conversation than her studies of various diseased internal organs.

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Naruto glared at the barely-stable spinning ball of chakra floating above his open palm. He couldn't believe it had taken over a week to get this stupid jutsu to work right. Okay, the Rasengan looked kind of cool, and it was sort of neat to learn one of the Fourth Hokage's techniques, but it was tricky as hell to get right. He normally wasn't this slow getting a jutsu down, and Ero-sennin looked pretty perturbed when he showed him he'd finally got it right.

To his credit, Jiraiya didn't blame him out loud, or call him out for slacking. But Naruto didn't want the old guy to take it too easy on him. There were only a few months before Hinata's "apprenticeship"

was over and he needed to be back in Konoha. He ground his teeth as he walked. He needed to be ready for anything. The next chuunin exam, like Jiraiya had hinted about, Itachi, who could show up tomorrow…

The Rasengan began to spin faster, expanding and contracting in time with Naruto's pulse. He scowled and focused his will, feeling for any fragments of red chakra circulating into his arm. The spiraling sphere spun even faster, but stabilized, forming a glowing blue aura as a barely perceptible whine filled the air.

"Is there anything else I can do with it?" Naruto asked.

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Out of sight behind his student, Jiraiya rubbed his hands together in gleeful anticipation. There was no way in hell he was letting this boy miss the next chuunin exam. He said the Hyuuga girl had helped him with his chakra control, but he hadn't expected this. He'd picked up other jutsu, like Swamp of the Underworld, with unnatural speed, but the Rasengan… well, that was on a whole other level. It took a conscious effort to downplay the surge of triumph he'd just experienced.

Kumo wasn't going to know what hit them.

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Training with his new summons was interesting, but not as straightforward as Naruto originally thought. From the way Jiraiya talked, he thought he'd be expected to present himself to the boss turtle as soon as he could summon the chakra. He learned a few things were different after his first night on the road.

At Jiraiya's suggestion, Naruto worked with his summons mainly between eating dinner and going to sleep. The old man still seemed a little miffed that he'd accepted Gai-sensei's contract, but to Naruto this seemed like the ideal solution for everyone. Gai got to pass his contract on to someone acceptable, and Naruto didn't need to worry about his summons eating Shino *or* his bugs.

Naruto twisted his fingers into the appropriate seals, and then focused the smallest amount of chakra he could manage into the technique. There was a poof of smoke, and when it cleared he saw a small blue turtle about the size of his hand. He frowned. This didn't match the description of any of the first tier summons that Gai had described. Naruto carefully picked up the blue turtle and peered at its face as it retracted. "Do you have a name?" he asked, "er, can you talk?"

His response was a face full of water blasting out of the turtle's shell. Naruto flinched back, sputtering, aiming the deluge away from his face, but still being careful not to drop the summoned turtle. He ignored the guffaws coming from Ero-sennin's direction. "Sorry, sorry, I guess you don't like being picked up," he stammered. The flow cut off as soon as it was pointed away from Naruto. He put the turtle back down and wiped his face with the sleeve of his jacket. The legs and head slowly re-emerged and the turtle began slowly walking around.

Naruto frowned as he ran his fingers through his wet hair. Jiraiya was still laughing. "Very useful. I don't think the toads ever managed to spit in my face."

Naruto smiled. "There's too much water," he exclaimed.

"What do you mean?" Jiraiya asked, still chuckling a little.

"That's more water than he could possibly contain inside that shell," Naruto clarified. "It must have used a jutsu, like that condensation one I know, to generate all that water." He watched as the summons chewed on the leaves of a small shrub near Naruto's bedroll. "Even the smallest ones can use chakra and some jutsu," he added.

"That's a bit of an assumption," Jiraiya objected, looking skeptical.

"Maybe, but it's possible," Naruto allowed. He smiled as the turtle spat out a half-chewed leaf and promptly disappeared in a puff of vapor.

Naruto fed a lot more chakra into the technique the second time. This time, when the mists cleared he saw a small, vaguely turtle-shaped figure with a bright green shell that came up to his knee at the highest point. "Genji?" Naruto asked after a moment.

"That's me," a low voice replied as the shell slowly pivoted. "You must be Uzumaki Naruto, the new summoner Maito Gai told my cousin about," he said after a moment.

"I'm glad I got you this time," Naruto admitted. "My first attempt I got a small blue turtle that wouldn't talk and spat water at me."

"Ah, we call him Squirtle. He's new." Genji replied. "He doesn't talk yet."

"Oh," Naruto said, ignoring the snickering coming from Jiraiya's direction. "Gai-sensei said there might be additional requests made by the first summons I spoke to. He said he could not tell what they would be, just that they were not always the same."

"Ummmm," Genji murmured, his head half-retracting into the shell. "I have no secondary stipulations. I'm not allowed."

"Why not?" Naruto asked.

"Errr… well, it did not turn out well with the last summoner," Genji admitted after a long pause. "I really thought I was doing him a favor, he was so serious…" the voice trailed off into hollow echoes as the head pulled back even further. Then Naruto heard a soft sigh, and Genji's head re-emerged. "I do need to warn you, however."

"Warn me about what?"

"We turtles are a tribe that prize wisdom above all else. When it says in the contract that we will be summoned in honor, it hinges on your true motivations, Uzumaki Naruto."

"In what way, Genji-san?"

"Think about your worst enemy, Uzumaki Naruto, the one you despise above all others."

Naruto briefly considered Orochimaru, the way he'd hurt both Hinata and Oji-sama… but then he froze. Itachi. He couldn't completely suppress a burst of killing intent that silenced all the nearby nightlife.

"I see you are thinking of them," Genji continued. "If you were to summon one of us to fight them, to kill this enemy, could you do it dispassionately? Could you truly say that you did so with no hate in your heart?"

"No, but Itachi has a lot of blood on his hands," Naruto growled. "He killed almost his entire clan, even the children. He killed Kurenai-sensei!"

Genji's dark eyes blinked and he let out a mournful sigh. "I do not say that your hate is without cause, Uzumaki Naruto, but be wary. Hate and anger can also warp your perceptions of right and wrong. They can help you rationalize actions you normally would not take. If you embrace them too closely, they can turn you into a monster."

Naruto clenched his fists, but didn't say anything. Genji's words were similar to something Kurenai-sensei had once said. He would think on them, even if it was painful. He nodded.

"I can sense your pain," Genji added in a softer tone. "This Itachi has hurt you deeply and the wound still aches. I won't tell you to discard your anger, but instead be on guard against it. In the past, our summoner forgot this, to their sorrow."

"What do you mean?" Naruto asked cautiously.

"In the act of summoning," Genji explained, "a link is formed between us. Through that link, we can see into you, to know why we are summoned. Summoning a turtle for an evil purpose goes against our very nature. We are wisdom. We are patience. We are enduring strength. But we will not see that strength misused."

"So if I was to summon a bigger turtle so I could… say… spy on the women's baths?" Naruto asked speculatively.

Genji's head turned so he was staring directly at Jiraiya. "I would not advise it. The misadventures of the Toad-Sage are well known, but Gamabunta and his spawn indulge him because Jiraiya of the Sannin gives them more respect than he gives to anyone else. The Toads have not always been… esteemed… among the Others, so naturally they value respect above all else. Drinking with their leader is symbolic of this."

Naruto nodded, ignoring the outraged scowl on Ero-sennin's face.

"But as I said," Genji continued, "that is not our way. In ages past, an arrogant summoner ordered our leader to destroy a small fortification occupied by a rebellious clan. He did not care that the rebel's cause was just, only that his leader had ordered their destruction. The youngest clan member was a small child, innocent and pure. The summoner's wicked demands broke the contract and the Friend of All Children turned upon him and destroyed his entire army. That child then inherited the contract and began the lineage that ends now with you, Uzumaki Naruto."

"Heh, maybe I was right," Jiraiya muttered, "maybe they really were originally an Iwa contract. I'll have to ask Fukasaku if he knows…"

"How will I know if my motivations are pure enough?" Naruto asked. This was a lot more complex than he thought it would be. He hoped he hadn't made a mistake accepting Gai's offer.

"You must weigh your options in battle dispassionately, Uzumaki Naruto," Genji replied. "Passion isn't always dangerous to thought, but it often impedes clear thinking. When you are centered and focused you will know if you are on the path of wisdom. Remember that we are enduring patience. Calling upon us for defense is usually more easily justified."

Naruto nodded, a little relieved. This wasn't too different than some of the things Kurenai-sensei had tried to pound into his head.

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Jiraiya had them travelling slowly in order to keep a low profile, but it was not without purpose. The Toad Sage was still a Konoha spymaster, and he needed to check up on his network of contacts. Naruto didn't want to be left behind wherever they were camping, so he made a point of keeping his ears open and his mouth shut during these meetings. He also didn't object to hair dyes or any other sort of disguises Jiraiya said their cover story required. It was actually kind of fascinating how the old man dropped his normally flamboyant persona and donned a new one like he was changing clothes. He also felt grudging respect for the old pervert. No one familiar with his "normal" behavior would think to associate his alternate identities with the infamous Toad Hermit.

Of course, that begged the question of who the old man really was. Was the man he called Ero-sennin, just another mask?

When he worked up the courage to ask one night on the road, Jiraiya just set his supper aside, threw his head back, and laughed. "What the hell kind of question is that? Who cares which one is the real me? Who knows if there even is such a thing? I'm having fun with it and I'm not hurting anyone that isn't an enemy of Konoha. What more can you ask from life?"

Naruto stared at his teacher and realized that his simple joy was not a ruse.

"Look kid," Jiraiya continued in a slightly more sober tone, "I figured out long ago that I needed to make peace with myself and accept who I am. My teammates didn't, and look where it got them." He grimaced. "One tried her damnedest to drown her sorrows in a lake of sake and the other one turned into a monster."

"You don't have any regrets?" Naruto asked, his throat threatening to close for some reason.

Jiraiya grimaced like he was in physical pain. "Of course I do, you ignoramus!" He sighed. "Especially you… well… Look. You can't live without any regrets, because no one can live a perfect life and make nothing but correct decisions. But you have to accept that mistakes happen. Learn from them… and then let them go. Don't let them eat you up inside. Don't let them make you live a life of hesitations, because that's no life at all."

"How do I let them go, sensei?" Naruto asked. It was probably the first time he'd used the term with Jiraiya and meant it so much.

"That's not so easy," the man replied after a moment. "What is your biggest regret?"

"K-kurenai-sensei," Naruto choked out.

Jiraiya's eyes widened in surprise.

"N-not having her as my sensei," Naruto added quickly. "It's just… the last time I saw her… alive. I didn't say anything."

"What should you have said?" Jiraiya coaxed.

"I… how much she helped me. How much I… appreciate her teachings. How much I will miss her." Naruto choked out. "Hinata said losing her mother was the worst pain she can remember… but this… I feel like…"

"Like she's the closest thing to a mother you ever had?" Jiraiya asked in a tired voice.

Naruto nodded. He hunched over a little as he sat in front of the campfire, arms folded across his aching stomach. He didn't even notice Jiraiya standing up, and jumped a little when the larger man plopped down next to him in front of the campfire. He jumped even more when hard knuckles rapped the top of his head.

"You're an idiot. You know that, right?" Jiraiya asked. It was evidently a rhetorical question because he didn't wait for an answer. "Do you really think she didn't know? The way she talked about you… I've seen mothers less into discussing their children. She was always talking about her team. She took the expectations for Jonin-sensei leaders and blew right past them… well, not in objectivity, maybe. I don't think she could have cared more if she was your biological mother."

"Do you really think so?" Naruto asked.

"That you are an idiot?" Jiraiya clarified. "Absolutely. You are one screwed up kid."

Naruto scowled. "Is that why you regret bringing me on this training trip?" he asked sarcastically.

"What?" Jiraiya asked. "No! Wait, you mean my regrets? When I said you, I meant I regret how you grew up." Jiraiya sighed and scrubbed a big hand across his face. "Let me explain. I knew your parents long before you were born. Before you ask, I can't tell you too much about them. Not yet. Hokage's orders. But there is a reason." Jiraiya paused and took a sip of his tea. Naruto thought he looked like he wanted something stronger. "I knew them well enough that they asked me to look out for you if something happened to them. I'm your godfather, Naruto."

Naruto realized his fists were clenched when the nails dug into his palms hard enough to draw blood. He bit back the angry words that wanted to fly from his mouth. "Why am I only just now meeting you?" he asked in quiet voice. He didn't think he'd given voice to the sense of betrayal he was feeling right then, but Jiraiya still flinched.

"When the fox was sealed in you," Jiraiya replied, "you stopping being just my responsibility. You became Konoha's responsibility and the Hokage had the final word. A lot of people wanted you killed as soon as it was safe, but he would have none of that. He convinced me you would be safer as a ward of Konoha, just another orphan to

our enemies. Obviously things didn't go like they should. I don't think he anticipated so many people trying to work around his secret law." Jiriaya sighed. "He sent me out to check on our enemies, to make sure no one planned to capitalize on our misfortune. Fortunately, most of them were too busy trying to figure out what happened to the Kyuubi to start any mischief."

"And then?" Naruto prompted.

"You seemed to be doing okay without me," Jiraiya said. "Hokage sent word you were well and had joined the academy. They can teach the basics as well as I can, and I still had enemies. Still do, as a matter of fact. Only now Akatsuki seems to be after you, so it's either in the wok or in the fire."

"Akatsuki?" Naruto asked.

"The ones in the black robes with the red clouds that I've been asking about. Itachi is one of them."

Naruto vaguely recalled the robes Itachi and Kisame wore, wondering why a secretive order of rogue ninjas would choose to wear such an obvious uniform. One chilling realization was that maybe they did so because they were just that good. He shuddered a little.

"Anyway, yes, I regret not doing things differently," Jiraiya continued after another sip of tea and a grimace. "But I'm not going to wallow in it. And now I have an opportunity to make up for it a little by turning you into the scariest little bastard Kumo has ever seen."

"What's that about Kumo?"

"That's the village hosting the next Chuunin Examination," Jiraiya explained. "I intend to have you ready to win the damn thing if Tsunade sends you, er, your team."

Naruto blinked. "Do you think she will?"

Jiraiya leered. "I think I can talk her into it if she can bet on the outcomes."

---

If there was one thing Naruto learned from being friends with Hyuuga Hinata, it was that talking about upsetting things tended to make them less upsetting. He needed to talk about what he'd learned from Jiraiya, and Genji was a good listener. That thought brought its own stab of guilt as Naruto realized why Jiraiya was so upset about him not signing the toad contract.

The next time he summoned Genji for their post-dinner lesson, it was in a clearing a short distance away from the campfire. The turtle nodded solemnly as Naruto explained what he'd learned and tried to articulate what he felt about the whole mess. After he was done, Genji hummed to himself for a while before standing up.

"Turtles do not have godfathers," Genji began, "it's not a custom amongst our kind. But the Toad Hermit told you of an obligation he accepted toward you before you were even born, yes?"

Naruto nodded.

"But, perhaps due to the events surrounding your birth, he was not able to meet that obligation. Before today, did you even know you had a godfather?"

Naruto shook his head.

"Then you are richer in some ways than you were yesterday, even if you are only enjoying that wealth belatedly. Your Godfather is a master spy, yes?"

Naruto nodded.

"Such a person does not reveal secrets by accident, do they? He wanted you to know of this obligation, and willingly told you of his own failure. That speaks better of him than his reputation would

suggest. I think the course of wisdom is to count your blessings, Naruto. You are better off than you were yesterday by the amount of one godfather. Even if he is of questionable character."

Naruto snorted.

---

Misato frowned as she expertly twirled the baton in her hand, her fingers little more than a blur. "It doesn't appear to have affected the balance any," she said. She squeezed a concealed trigger and a razor-sharp blade folded out of the haft, locking in place with a click. Nodding, she picked up its mate and spun the pair through an extremely complex kata. Air whistling past the blades was the only sound for more than a minute.

Finally, she stopped and carefully folded the blades back into the batons, before handing them to her son.

"The necessary modifications were minute enough that any reduction in structural integrity should be minimal," Shino said as he accepted them with a slight bow.

"Your girlfriend's father does good work," she observed in an approving tone.

Shino merely raised an eyebrow in response.

"What did she think of your little idea?" Misato asked curiously.

"I was informed that if I ever used it during one of our spars, she would render me incapable of future reproduction," Shino replied.

"Wow!" Misato gushed, "I can practically hear the wedding vows now!"

Shino sighed as he took his weapons and left for training.

"Must you?" Shibi asked his wife.

"I must," Misato replied. "He's never going to get a girlfriend at this rate."

Shibi sighed.

---

Naruto continued getting to know more of the Turtle Clan. Many of them were like larger versions of Genji. Mostly slow and thoughtful, but kind and equally slow to take offense. But there were some exceptions…

Some of the more advanced ones seemed to be as comfortable standing upright as the others were on all fours. The first of these he met was named Kabuto, no relation to the weird Konoha genin from the chuunin exam. He appeared to be named for the elaborate helmet he wore on his head. It matched the lacquered samurai armor that protected his unusually long limbs. He was close to Naruto's height, but carried a naginata, or sword spear, with a shaft longer than Jiraiya was tall.

"I am honored to meet the new summoner," he said. "I am Kabuto!" he proclaimed as he bowed.

"I am Uzumaki Naruto, genin of Konoha," Naruto replied, bowing back as he'd been coached by Genji.

Kabuto eyed Naruto as he straightened back up. "Do you study a weapon, Uzumaki?" he barked.

Naruto shook his head. "I was told I should wait until I was near my full growth to select a proper weapon. Until then, I study taijutsu so my hands are free to form seals, and I know how to use kunai and shuriken."

"So taijutsu is your current focus," the turtle observed in a thoughtful tone. "That is… acceptable. I understand that you trained taijutsu under the other summoner?"

Naruto nodded.

"Good," Kabuto said with a chuckle as he dropped into a ready stance. "We shall spar now."

What followed next was, for Kabuto, evidently a light workout. For Naruto, it was an advanced seminar in dodging and not getting skewered by that really sharp-looking naginata. After 30 minutes he felt like he'd spent the afternoon sparring with Lee. Fortunately, Kabuto was adept at twisting the haft at the last instant so Naruto would get slapped by the flat of the blade, rather than cut by the edge. Just as Naruto was about to drop, Kabuto stopped and fell back into a guard stance.

"That was acceptable," Kabuto declared after a moment. "We should continue this every day, until…"

"Uh, until what?" Naruto replied, afraid to ask.

"Until you can take the naginata away from me without getting hit once." Kabuto clarified.

Naruto winced, but slowly nodded his agreement.

---

Hinata inhaled sharply as she left the apothecary. Her studies had branched out into pharmaceuticals, including how to prepare refined medicines from the basic herbs. But she was not prepared to run into a group of branch family Hyuuga picking up supplies. A few widened their eyes when they saw her, but then they immediately looked away. Even worse were the ones that looked through her like she didn't exist.

She knew from Neji's notes that her father had made a declaration. During the period of her service to Senju Tsunade-sama, Hinata was to be treated as a Senju. Ideally, no shame would fall upon the Hyuuga for having a member of the main family as a servant to another clan. It was one thing to read about this in Neji's letter, or

even understand why in her head. But in her heart… she felt like she'd just been stabbed.

It was only long experience in hiding her true feelings that kept Hinata from breaking down. She would not shame herself with a public display of weakness. Not now.

She felt even worse when she realized that there was another Hyuuga in the group, trailing behind the others. Neji. She felt her cheeks begin to burn with shame. He could read her far better than any branch family member, perhaps better than any other Hyuuga. He would know her shame and despair like she'd shouted it from the rooftops.

Unlike the others, Neji gave the smallest fraction of a nod as his eyes locked gazes with hers. She doubted anyone else could see it, but the barest hint of a smile curled the corner of his mouth. It wasn't a smirk of derision, either, just simple pleasure in meeting his cousin.

The pain faded like a mirage, and Hinata returned his smile with one of her own. Just as small and discreet, but no less heartfelt.

She passed her cousin, finding her steps lighter than they were before.

---

As Genji slowly introduced Naruto to the more senior turtles, the chakra requirements for summoning them began to mount. He also began to notice that the jutsu he practiced for Jiraiya were becoming steadily more energy-intensive. After their second month on the road, Jiraiya produced a piece of chakra-treated paper and asked Naruto to focus his chakra into it, making sure to exclude any of the Kyuubi's chakra. After taking a moment to make sure his hands and arms were clear, he did so and discovered that his primary element was actually air.

"Huh," Naruto said. "I would have thought it was water or earth."

"What makes you say that?" Jiraiya asked.

"Well, I can do Condensation and Swamp of the Underworld pretty well."

"That's because you practiced them," Jiraiya shot back. "I lost track of how many times. And you have stupidly huge chakra reserves. Air being your primary element means that you will find it easier to learn air techniques, and they will work better for you. It's actually pretty rare in Konoha."

"So, do you know any air techniques?"

Jiraiya gave a long-suffering sigh. "Of course I do. One of the easiest is called Great Breakthrough. Now watch these seals and repeat them without molding chakra…"

---

Aburame Suba asked his nephew to stay a moment after the meeting of the clan elders concluded. That this was done through delivered pheromones and not speech was itself interesting. Shibi lingered over his papers, shuffling their order as the other members filed out. As the most junior member of the council, he was often stuck with the majority of the filing and record-keeping, so this was far from unusual. His fellow council members were not likely to linger in the council chambers after a three hour meeting regarding budgetary allocations. It seems that some things are, in fact, truly universal.

When they were alone, Shibi stilled his papers as Suba re-sealed the room.

"I received your message last night," Suba said without preamble. "The room is secure."

"Shino received a message a week ago from a discreet courier service, based in Grass," Shibi began without preamble. "Using circuitous language, it directed him to a cache hidden by a genjutsu

keyed to Shino's chakra signature. Inside the cache was a sealed scroll that required his blood to open."

"Those are rather elaborate precautions," Suba observed. "Do we know the origination of this communication?"

"Yes," Shibi replied. "His jonin-sensei."

"The deceased one?" Suba clarified.

"Ah, yes, elder," Shibi confirmed. "The courier had orders to send out the message if they did not hear from her by a certain interval."

"You are well informed."

"It was explained in the scroll," Shibi explained. "She wished to avoid giving any false hope that she was still alive."

"That is… unusually well thought out. I am starting to understand some of Shino's rapid development. I understand he may be prepared for a third hive in the future?"

"Yes, Elder," Shibi agreed, "but her precautions made more sense once one considered the contents of the scroll. In it, she details what she has uncovered and what she has surmised regarding an active conspiracy working in part through the village council."

Aburame Suba did not show surprise, but he stared at his nephew for a curiously long period of time. "Does this have anything to do with the actions described by Bataru?"

"In part," Shibi confirmed. "But there are also hints of further attempts to subvert the Hokage's authority, as well as the elimination of certain undesired parties."

Suba went still again. "Tell me everything," he commanded.

The Toad Hermit slowly revised his opinion of the turtles, or at least some of them. Kabuto proved to be damn useful. Jiraiya talked Naruto into training with the little armor-plated menace first thing each morning as a warm up. That gave him a few more precious minutes of sleep, and usually slowed Naruto down enough that keeping up with his godson wasn't killing him.

Jiraiya knew going into this that keeping Naruto fully occupied would be a challenge. That was actually good, in a way. They could squeeze the maximum amount of intensive training into the six months they had, working one-on-one. What he didn't realize was just *how* intensive. He'd gotten a taste in Konoha, preparing him for the chuunin exam, but he'd clearly underestimated how hard Gai was working the brat. Maybe Kurenai's death was making it worse… someone his level trying to catch up to Itachi was crazy. Damned if he wasn't trying though.

Jiraiya knew he was clearly getting too old for this crap.

It wasn't just the physical side either, though they were doing an hour every day on advanced taijutsu forms and some sparring. He was constantly having to revise his estimates of Naruto's progress and devise new training techniques. His apprentice was already clever enough to see the advantages of shadow clones for certain types of training, and he wasn't afraid to use them. And by use, Jiraiya meant "use them in ridiculous numbers". He was picking up the Air techniques Jiraiya knew at a frightening rate.

It didn't let up, even when they were travelling. Unless they were trying for best possible speed, Naruto needed his mind occupied. And going all out was not a good way to stay under anyone's radar. The boy was used to Yuuhi Kurenai giving them problems to mull over while they walked, so if Jiraiya said nothing, the questions started. Questions about everything. Jiraiya knew that he should not wish for a less motivated student, but damned if it wasn't exhausting. And discussion of some topics was not something he wanted to do while strolling on a road to nowhere in particular. So he tried to give Naruto problems and lessons associated with what they were

actually doing, namely tradecraft and how to run a spy ring. It was a little gratifying to see someone soak in all the little things he'd picked up on over the years.

And asking Naruto to flesh out imaginary life histories for him to use wherever they were heading gave Jiraiya a little peace and quiet.

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Hinata resisted the urge to worry at her lip as she concentrated on the chakra flowing through her hands. She did not flinch as the fish under her hands gave a feeble twitch. Any mistakes now and this fish would be just as dead as the last one. She felt bad for the fish, but Tsunade-sama insisted that this was the best way to learn the Mystical Palm healing technique.

Also, part of her duties included preparing dinner for Tsunade-sama and Shizune-sempai… and she was running out of new fish recipes.

It was really just a matter of chakra control, something she normally excelled at. But chakra control good enough for academy jutsu, or even jyukken strikes, was one thing. Medical techniques required a whole new order of precision to avoid disaster. Minute fluctuations in the flow of chakra could disrupt the healing process, or even inflict more damage. The first few fishes Hinata worked on were not even edible by the time she was done.

Still, she seemed to finally be getting the hang of this. She could feel the fish slowly reviving under her hands. She bore down, forcing the chakra to flow as she willed, not allowing an instant of deviation. So focused was she that the timer ringing almost did not register.

She looked up to see a smiling Shizune-sempai holding a bucket of clear water.

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All of this training was slowly increasing his chakra reserves, but this latest summon left Naruto feeling a little light-headed. He wasn't sure if he had ever expended that much chakra on a single technique

before. He wondered if this was how other ninja felt when they got chakra exhaustion. It kind of sucked, to be honest. Fortunately, his head quickly began to clear. He waved his hands, trying to disperse the summoning fog that surrounded him. As much chakra as that took, he expected to see a turtle the size of his apartment building. Genji and the others were a little vague on the details regarding 'The Old One'.

But nothing loomed out of the rapidly clearing wisps of vapor. There was a muffled cough and Naruto looked down.

The latest summon was an upright, if slightly stooped, figure only a little taller than Genji. His coloration was various hues of faded green, but what really grabbed Naruto's attention were the huge spectacles perched on the bridge of the turtle's beak. He could not figure out what was holding them in place, and they made the already protuberant eyes look huge. Adding a little height was an old-fashioned sleeping cap made of striped fabric. The pointed top had a rounded piece of fluff that dangled down the side of the turtle's head.

The turtle opened its mouth twice, making a smacking sound, and then let out a yawn as it stretched. The motion made the tassel brush against the side of its head, and one hand quickly swept the sleeping cap off its head. The other hand reached down and tugged on a section of the shell plates covering the torso. Naruto blinked as the shell pulled away to reveal a disturbingly deep drawer. The cap was stuffed within and it was closed before Naruto could confirm what he thought he just saw.

"Sorry, sorry," the old turtle rasped. "Fell asleep doing a bit of bedtime reading, young Genji said you might be contacting me soon. Bit of a night owl, eh? Almost as bad as old Pog, back in the day. Oh well…"

"Yes, Old One, my apologies, I am Uzumaki Naruto, genin of Konoha," Naruto introduced himself, bowing.

"Old One?" the weathered turtle asked, "is that what they are calling me now?"

Naruto nodded.

The old turtle snorted. "I am Clothahump, and that is all the name I will ever need. I am, however, too old to stand on formalities. Let us sit and speak of things. You wouldn't happen to have any tea, would you?"

Naruto shook his head and created shadow-clones to fetch fresh water and the tea pot.

"Ah, useful spell, that," Clothahump said approvingly. "I don't mean to be a bother, but we have much to discuss and I find that my throat tends to go dry if I speak too long. A blessing, by Mudge's reckoning."

Soon the ancient turtle was warming his feet by the campfire and complimenting whoever purchased their supply of green tea. Clothahump reminded Naruto a little of the old people he sometimes saw around the former Hokage, a little stooped and fussy. On the other hand, he was a lot nicer to Naruto, and appreciated everything that was done to make him more comfortable. It was a little disconcerting, how kind he was for such a senior summons. Maybe it was just a reflection of the nature of the Turtles – most of them seemed to treat Naruto like a long-lost cousin. Even Kabuto, when he wasn't sparring… maybe Naruto was just too used to Gai.

"I can tell," the old turtle began, "that summoning me severely taxed your energy. It may be a while before you can summon The Four, or The Friend to All Children and his offspring. But there are also certain spells, er, I mean, *techniques* you can learn because of your link to us. In time I may even be able to initiate you into the greater mysteries… but that is many steps down the road."

"I am still working on improving my chakra control and my reserves," Naruto admitted.

"I can tell," Clothahump replied. "You have a lot of power for one so young. I don't doubt you could summon one or two of The Four already, except they refuse to be separated. You have to have enough energy to summon all four, split into four equal streams."

"Is that why they call them The Four?" Naruto asked.

"Yes. Well, and they have occidental names that are ridiculous and difficult to pronounce," Clothahump admitted. He frowned. "I wonder if that's why they call me… nevermind. Yes, continue working on your energy. I think the current Chief Summoner chose wisely when he selected you as his successor, but it will still require much effort to realize your full potential. In the meantime, I will teach you the beginnings of turtle magic…"

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Four months away from Konoha saw Jiraiya leading them into a remote corner of Wind Country. The Toad Hermit hadn't briefed Naruto on who they would be meeting way out here, but the genin held his tongue. He knew his godfather well enough now to realize that Jiraiya would tell him when he was ready, and acting disinterested would probably get him to reveal his plans the soonest.

Finally, the old man called a halt when they were in the middle of a wide but shallow depression. Naruto looked around, eyeing ripples in the stony ground that seemed to have been carved from resentful earth by the wind itself.

"So… where are we?" Naruto finally asked.

"The middle of nowhere," Jiraiya answered.

Naruto sighed. "Okay, why are we out here?"

Jiraiya smirked. "Better question. We are miles and miles from any outpost, any sign of civilization. If I am right, we are the only ninja for one hundred miles in any direction."

Naruto swallowed. No, this didn't sound ominous. Not at all. "What do we need that much privacy for?"

"We need to see if you can put the nine-tails to work," Jiraiya answered in a serious tone.

"Uh, sensei, I really don't think that's a good idea," Naruto protested.

"It probably isn't," Jiraiya agreed, "but I need to teach you how to best use every advantage you've got, and a bottomless well of chakra you can draw on is definitely an advantage."

Naruto shook his head. "Kyuubi's chakra messes me up more often than it helps, I think it does that on purpose. Besides, I want to succeed using my own skills, not borrowed power. I don't want to owe anything to the demon fox that tried to destroy Konoha."

"Look," Jiraiya argued, "I understand your feelings on this. Under normal circumstances I'd honor you for them. But this is far from normal. A bunch of serious S-class nukenin are after you, probably because of your prisoner. You need to use every advantage, every skill you can master, if you want to get through this."

"It's not safe though," Naruto protested. "Every time I've drawn on it's chakra, I think it's influenced me. It's made me really, really angry before. I almost forget myself."

Jiraiya frowned and scratched at his jaw. "Maybe you need to explain a few facts to your prisoner."

"How do I do that? It only spoke to me before when I was unconscious."

"Meditation should work," Jiraiya replied in a speculative tone.

Naruto let out a groan.

Fortunately, it did not take as long as Naruto expected before he found himself in the damp basement mindscape again. Naruto sometimes wondered how aware the fox was of what was going on, and this just fueled his suspicions. He stood and locked gazes with the massive face behind the seal. Again, Naruto was struck by how real it all seemed. He could hear condensation slowly dripping from a vent. It mostly smelled like damp socks, but there was an underlying musk Naruto remembered from before.

"What brings you here, jailor?" the kyuubi snarled.

"We need to talk," Naruto said.

"So talk, monkey," the fox declared dismissively. "It's not like I have any interest in your petty lies."

Naruto clenched his jaw, refusing to be baited. "I know you're at least partially aware of what's going on, so why would I lie? And I think you have an interest in our mutual survival."

"Maybe you're not quite as stupid as you look. But just because I removed that one seal, don't imagine I care what happens to you."

"…and I'm sure a bunch of S-Class missing-nin want to capture me just so they can set you free. No ulterior motives there, I'm sure," Naruto shot back in a sarcastic drawl. He was starting to understand why Shikamaru did that. Fun and effective at getting your point across.

The kyuubi seemed less impressed. "That still sounds more like your problem than mine," it growled. "You humans have sought to use my kind as weapons for centuries. Why should I care about trading one master for another?"

"The Fourth didn't seal you to make a weapon!" Naruto shot back. "You were attacking our home. What was he supposed to do, stand back and watch you do it?"

"My grievance with Konoha is older than that pathetic cluster of hovels you call home!" the kyuubi roared, muzzle slamming against the seal. "I have been used and sealed away in turn by your hokages, and I would enjoy nothing more than to piss on the ashes of your cursed village."

The wind from the nine-tails' rant pushed Naruto back several feet, his sandals grinding across the damp concrete. "Okay, fine," he shouted back. "I wasn't there, so I can't dispute your grievance. But I didn't do anything to you. Hinata and Shino didn't do anything to you. We were babies the last time you were out. Even if you do have a right to be angry, taking it out on people who didn't hurt you is just wrong. And it's stupid, and you are not stupid."

The kyuubi's eyes narrowed, but when it spoke, it was without the gale force winds. "I still don't see any benefit in helping you, monkey."

Naruto decided to go for a different approach. "And here I thought you didn't want me embarrassing you."

"What are you jabbering about now?"

"Before," Naruto replied, "with the seal. You said you didn't want anyone else marking up your den. Lots of people know you are sealed inside me now. If I get taken out because you won't lend me any extra chakra, do you know what they will think? Guess that kyuubi wasn't as powerful as we thought. Maybe he isn't really the strongest of the biju. Shukaku got huge when he manifested through Gaara… now that was a real threat."

"Are you actually trying to manipulate me?" the nine-tailed fox asked incredulously.

"Not very well," Naruto admitted. "But no matter what happened in the past, we are stuck with each other, aren't we?"

"Not if you open that seal," the fox reminded him.

"Which would probably kill me, and would definitely endanger my friends, I'll pass on that," Naruto replied. "It's not like I'm asking for so much, am I?"

There was a pause as the fox seemed to mull over Naruto's words. "You will only use my power to destroy your worst enemies?" the kyuubi clarified.

"I'll use my own skills whenever possible," Naruto vowed. "I don't want to be too dependent on your power, and you deserve better than to become a glorified crutch." The last bit was added on a whim, but if he was getting any sort of concession, a little flattery wouldn't hurt.

"Very well," the Kyuubi growled. "I will allow it in emergencies, and against truly strong opponents."

"Well," Naruto added, "it would probably be a good idea to practice with it a little bit. We're out in the middle of nowhere and I have no idea what I can do with your chakra. I'd rather do my trial and error now, and not in the middle of a fight. I have no wish to make either of us look foolish."

The fox's glare was back. "You are a pushy little monkey, aren't you? Then I want something in return."

"What can I give you in here?" Naruto asked curiously.

"Well, you can clean it the hell up!" the Kyuubi snarled.

"Wait, what?" Naruto asked confused. "I don't know anything about fuuinjutsu!"

The kyuubi no kitsune, whose tails could wreak havoc and create cataclysms with but a wave, actually sighed in disgust. "Stupid monkey. The seal is the only real thing in here. The rest of this place is a projection of your so-called mind! And I am sick of sitting in this damp, stinking mindscape of yours!'

Naruto winced. That had never occurred to him. He didn't need a mirror to know his face and exposed neck were reddening. "Uhm, I'll talk to Jiraiya and get right on that. As soon as I know how."

"Go," the kyuubi spat.

Naruto got.

Author's Note: Yes, I am back. And yes, I intend to update much more often now. How long I'll continue to do so depends on some real life things, like finances, , my original fiction, and other stuff. I'm back to work on Nightmares of Futures Past now.

Thanks as always to Runsamok, Tempest Kitsune, and Torbin for awesome beta work. You three rock! This chapter would be much poorer without you.

# Reunions and Revelations

Chapter 24

Hinata looked up from the scroll she was reading. The muscles along her spine protested as she straightened up. She'd lost track of time again and she was only halfway through Tsunade-sama's notes on chakra-stimulated nerve regeneration. Her new teacher was re-writing the book on what could and could not be done. With what she was reading now, many injuries thought to be career-ending could become mere inconveniences. She slowly stretched as she made a note of her place in the huge scroll.

The door opened and Shizune-sempai stuck her head in. "Still at it?" she asked. "You need to take a break, Hinata," she chided in a kindly tone.

"My apologies," Hinata said quickly. "I lost track of time. This work with regenerating nerve cells… it's amazing!"

Shizune smiled. "Yes, a little too amazing, sometimes."

"I'm sorry," Hinata said quickly, "I don't understand."

Shizune motioned for Hinata to follow her, and spoke as they left the classroom. "These more advanced techniques are highly effective, but they require extremely good chakra control, not to mention large reserves to sustain them. Tsunade's best work gave birth to techniques that only she and a handful of other people will ever be able to use. That's great for special cases, but for the overall population the impact will be minimal."

"I've heard her talk about the lack of qualified medic-nins," Hinata replied.

"That's part of it," Shizune agreed. "There is also an element of… well, you know the saying about how it's easier to destroy than to

create?"

Hinata nodded.

"Well, it's also a lot easier to destroy than to repair," Shizune declared with a grimace. "Most shinobi can spend much less time training with their elemental affinity and see a lot more progress. If Tsunade had taken her natural chakra reserves and control, and spent all that time working on lightning jutsu, she could easily have humbled the best lightning users in Kumo. That's one reason there aren't more combat medic-nins… most active-duty shinobi concentrate on things that increase their combat effectiveness."

Hinata frowned. "But if treatment is delayed until after the patient is evacuated, the prognosis is usually so much worse!"

"That's true," Shizune agreed, "which is why we're starting this program. Tsunade thinks the improved treatment outcomes are worth the extra training required. But some would argue that having more combat-oriented ninja is the better strategy."

Hinata thought about this for a moment as they made their way down the hall. "Who do you think is right?" she asked after a moment. One thing she admired about Shizune-sempai was that while she was utterly loyal to Tsunade, she wasn't afraid to disagree with her mentor.

Shizune smiled. "I think that combat medics may not be needed as much in peace-time, or when there is only light skirmishing. Injuries may occur, but they are not as common, and highly skilled shinobi focused on offensive techniques can eliminate their enemies quickly enough to avoid injury. However, in war-time or extended operations in hostile terrain, mistakes are more common, and injuries will occur with greater frequency. Highly skilled shinobi can suffer mortal or career-ending injuries, but the availability of highly skilled, immediate medical care can often reverse that. I think, in the long run, Tsunade's plan will save far more resources than it costs Konoha."

Hinata nodded as she digested this train of thought, but Shizune wasn't done.

"So," she continued, "from a resource use perspective, it's more effective when the need is most dire. But that doesn't even address what Konoha stands for. You've heard the Third Hokage talk about the Will of Fire before, right?"

Hinata nodded. The old Hokage made a point of addressing each Academy class in their first year.

"That idea was really introduced to Konoha through the Senju clan, Tsunade-sama's ancestors. They saw the village as being like one big family, and everyone should love the village they fight to protect. But that idea goes both ways. If we are like one family, then that means that we should value the lives of individual shinobi, no matter their skill. If that means reducing our overall firepower to prevent unnecessary deaths, then that it a price we should be willing to pay."

Hinata thought about her own family for a moment. For once, it didn't bring a sudden stab of shame. "I'm not sure everyone sees it that way," she said quietly.

Shizune laughed. "They're wrong, or at least the Hokage thinks they are wrong, and her opinion carries a lot more weight now. Of course, it helps that Sarutobi-sama is helping her manage the council."

Hinata nodded. She hadn't seen much of the former Hokage recently, but when he came in for his medical follow-ups he seemed much more relaxed than Hinata remembered. Despite losing an arm, the shadows under his eyes were lighter and he moved like a weight had been removed from his shoulders. Hinata was glad that his retirement seemed to be good for him, but she wondered just how heavy a burden it was to be Hokage. Tsunade herself seemed perpetually grumpy, and Hinata hoped that Naruto didn't ever come to regret his life's ambition.

The two kunoichi were quiet as they made their way out of the building. Shizune squinted at the bright afternoon light and fished a scrap of paper out of her sleeve. "Well, here is what we will need from the apothecary for next week. Can you pick it up while you are running errands?"

Hinata nodded. "Of course, Shizune-sempai." This would also give her a chance to visit Kurenai-sensei's house and water Naruto's plants.

Shizune smiled. "Oh, and a question came up. There is another chuunin exam scheduled in a little over a month, not too long after Naruto is due to return. We are thinking about sending your team, but Tsunade reviewed everyone's file and there is a potential complication. This exam is to be held in Kumogakure."

Hinata froze in place for a moment. "I think that my father would raise some objections to that, even if I had my eyes sealed against theft."

Shizune coughed. "Sealed? No, wait Hinata, let me start over. Normally, we wouldn't send a team, let alone several, to a Kumo exam. They're pretty suspicious of other villages, even in peace time, and you saw all too well how an exam can serve as cover for an invasion. We haven't been invited in the past."

Hinata nodded. Konoha was only just now repairing the last visible reminders of the Sound and Sand invasion.

"Well, this year it's different. The Raikage himself has extended invitations to Konoha and Suna to send teams to their exam." Shizune lowered her voice a little, eyeing the foot traffic passing them on the the street. "We think it's because the invasion went so poorly."

"Poorly?"

Shizune nodded. "With the forces at hand, and struck with surprise, Konoha still fared pretty well. Sarutobi-sama being forced to retire was the worst thing to happen, but with Tsunade's assumption of the office, Konoha still has a strong Hokage. We think the Raikage is curious, especially since rumors state that some of the exam contestants played a key role, yet none of them were promoted."

Hinata suppressed a sigh. She knew she wasn't included in that number, but from things she had overheard, she knew the village council cancelled the examination while the Third was incapacitated. Otherwise, she was sure her teammates would have been promoted. While it did mean she would have another chance to test with them, she didn't wish to benefit from their misfortune. What made it worse was that she was fairly certain her father had a hand in that injustice. She had the impression that very little happened on the council without his input. "So you think he wants to get a look at our shinobi to see if the rumors are true?"

Shizune nodded. "Yes, enough so that the Raikage is willing to personally guarantee the safety of our candidates travelling to and from the exam." Shizune put her hand on Hinata's shoulder. "He has specifically repudiated the clan he said was behind the attempt to kidnap you years ago."

Hinata resisted the urge to wring her hands. That was quite a concession, she had to admit. If anything was attempted, the Raikage would suffer a huge loss of face. Wars were started over less. "What does Hokage-sama think?" she asked quietly.

"She thinks that, with those guarantees, this is an opportunity for Konoha to make an impression on potential allies, enemies, and clients."

Hinata nodded. She remembered the Third Hokage explaining the true purpose behind the chuunin examinations before the preliminary round. "So she is accepting the Raikage's invitation?" she asked.

Shizune nodded. "She is, but remember that participation in the exams is strictly voluntary. You do not have to go if you don't want to," she explained. "In fact, given your history, I would not blame you at all if you decided to wait for the next one."

Hinata shook her head. "If Shino and Naruto-kun are ready for the exam, I will go with them," she said quickly.

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Shino found himself gaining new respect for his missing teammate's mental fortitude. This happened, not coincidentally, every time he was attached to Team Gai for a mission.

While he had entered a cautious détente with Hyuuga Neji, and Tenten was a pleasure to train with, the third member of Team Gai, along with their sensei, was another matter entirely. While he could not deny Maito Gai's proficiency in taijutsu and overall skill as a shinobi, the sheer amount of noise the man generated was ridiculous. When you added Rock Lee to the mix, it was even worse.

This, of course, made him question his own sanity when he found himself attending their so-called morning warm-up sessions. Maito Gai had requested that Tenten join him and Lee in the mornings, as he wanted to increase her training tempo. Tenten, who was not pleased with her showing in the previous chuunin examination, reluctantly agreed. She mentioned this to Shino after one of their practice spars, and added that he had been invited as well. Apparently, her jonin-sensei was aware of their training together and approved. Unfortunately, morning was when his mother Misato was usually available for training. While he had learned much of her signature two-kama praying mantis style, she still had more advanced techniques to teach him. When he explained this to Tenten, she accepted his decline without rancor, which he appreciated.

He apparently made an error of some sort when he mentioned this to his parents at dinner that evening. His father said nothing, but a minute wince was visible to Shino's trained eye. His mother,

however, quickly informed him that she would soon not be available for morning training. This was likely to be for a while, so he might as well attend the morning sessions. When Shino questioned the reasons for this unavailability, his parents' reactions suggested that this was not a line of inquiry that should be pursued if he wished to avoid severe cognitive dissonance.

Not even the most stoic Aburame son wished to learn details regarding maternal fertility schedules. Hopefully, a younger sibling might provide a useful distraction at some point in the future.

Tenten seemed unusually pleased when he informed her of his schedule change, and that he would be able to join her after all. The reason for this became all too clear during the first session he attended. She did not want to be the only sane person there.

Maito Gai and Rock Lee's proclivities were already known to Shino. What was less apparent was the degree to which Hinata had internalized those philosophies. When she mentioned sparring for a couple of hours, Shino thought that meant taking turns, with time to cool down between and analyze how each match had gone. Like sane people. He did not realize "sparring for a couple of hours" meant fighting continuously for one hundred and twenty minutes, going all out the entire time. The only time he saw either her or Lee even pause was when they were knocked down or half stunned from a glancing blow.

As he squared off with Tenten, he realized that she desperately wanted someone else there with more than a minimal degree of sanity. By the end of Gai-sensei's ridiculously-difficult cool down exercises, Shino began to understand how Naruto's taijutsu had evolved so quickly.

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By the time Naruto was comfortable pulling up one tail's worth of chakra and manifesting a weak chakra cloak, Jiraiya was antsy to head back to Konoha. He'd been exchanging messages with Tsunade, so he was aware of the Raikage's offer. It made him a little

uneasy when a potential enemy offered something you wanted to do anyway.

Jiraiya could understand why the man might want to get a look at potential future competition. However, the leader of Kumogakure might not anticipate how this could blow up in his face. Other people, including Kumo's favored clients, would be attending as well. Jiraiya had always been a little leery of his sensei's vision of the chuunin exams as a proxy for outright warfare. But if ever there was a chance to put this theory to the test, it was now. A strong show of force by Konoha's genin could make their enemies reconsider future plans. Jiraiya smiled when he remembered debriefing the Sand genin Temari after the invasion. She was convinced by that point that her father had been insane to even consider attacking Konoha. Fostering that belief in Kumo and their allies was, in his opinion, worth a little risk.

Now he and his apprentice were practicing one of Jiraiya's specialties: how to travel quickly without anyone noticing. Any idiot can leap from tree to tree in order to cover ground quickly. That also means any idiot can detect them, or find the traces. There was a whole science dedicated to examining the scuff marks left on various kinds of bark by sandals. That sort of thing wasn't Jiraiya's specialty. He preferred infiltration and social engineering, but as a Konoha spymaster, he kept up on what his opposition might be up to.

Joining a suitably-equipped merchant caravan under a well-rehearsed identity allowed you to avoid all sorts of attention. Picking the right one, in other words fairly prosperous and transporting perishable goods, meant you would be moving quickly by civilian standards with no one questioning why. It also gave him an excuse to drill Naruto on altering his distinctive appearance without resorting to Henge no Jutsu. He'd been pleased to note during the search for Tsunade that Naruto's former sensei had at least trained her students in the basics. But this was one area where small mistakes could lead to grave consequences, so Jiraiya wasn't about to pass up the opportunity to drill Naruto on his disguise skills.

When the time came to part ways from the caravan, Naruto also showed that Kurenai's efforts to get him to think had not been wasted. He suggested that he leave behind a couple of over-charged shadow clones, disguised as himself and Jiraiya in their travelling identities. That way, if someone was tracking their movements, especially after the fact, they would have no way of knowing exactly when they did leave. At the rate the caravan was heading for Wave Country, even half a day would really throw off a potential tracker.

Jiraiya was a little dubious at first. He wasn't sure the clones would last long enough to be worth it. He tried not to notice how smug Naruto was, a full twenty-four hours later, when he informed him that the clones had finally slipped away into the woods near the caravan's campsite and dispelled themselves. Instead, Jiraiya just grunted and picked up the pace. Their six months was almost over, and back in Konoha there was a large bottle of sake with his name on it.

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Tsunade squeezed the bridge of her nose as Hyuuga Hiashi left her office. The leader of the Hyuuga clan had not been pleased to learn of the invitation to Kumo's chuunin exam, but in the end the Raikage's guarantees had been enough to make him relent. In truth, he seemed unusually interested in that aspect, and her more suspicious side wondered if he was planning something underhanded.

She sighed and opened her bottom desk drawer. Of course he was planning something underhanded, that was a given. But she didn't think he'd try anything aimed at making the Raikage publicly lose face. There was too much at stake, and the consequences if someone leaked the plot too severe. At the least, the Raikage would demand his life, and Tsunade would gladly give it to her fellow kage. She extracted the bottle of sake and took a sip, savoring the burn as she contemplated sending the arrogant clan leader to the gallows with a song in her heart. It wasn't terribly professional, but the

Hyuuga had made of habit of subtly reminding her of how unqualified she was to lead.

She was just glad Hiruzen's retirement gave him the time to run interference for her with the council. Her lips twisted, even as she took another sip. It still felt strange, calling her old sensei by his given name, but he had insisted once she became Hokage. They were of equal rank now, and shared an understanding of how heavy that hat could really be. Retired or not, The Professor continued to teach.

She'd been more than happy to send her predecessor's advisors, Homura and Koharu, off to their own retirements "with the gratitude of Konoha". Most of their status derived from long service and being Hiruzen's teammates back in the dawn of time. Danzo, however, was too well entrenched. He was allied with, or had dirt on, a goodly portion of the Village Council and was reputed to have contacts in the court of the Fire Daimyo. How much of that was rumor, she didn't know, but it was enough to make her handle him with care.

Being a wandering alcoholic was so much easier than sorting out all this political crap.

Still, there were compensations. She now had the power to push through a comprehensive medic-nin training program. Hyuuga Hinata had the potential to be, dare she say it, a medical prodigy. Imagining the look on Hiashi's face if she announced that got her through several very dull meetings.

The progress reports from Maito Gai and Aburame Shibi, along with Jiraiya's messenger toads, were equally encouraging. Accepting the Raikage's offer was a risk, but a calculated one. Tsunade took a third, smaller sip and sighed as she re-sealed the bottle and placed it back in the drawer. She paused and extracted a thick file folder. Yuuhi Kurenai submitted such detailed reports that she wondered if the woman wasn't exhibiting some kind of compulsive behavior. She opened the folder to the piece of paper she'd left sticking out to mark her place and sighed. If the jonin were still alive today, Tsunade

would be torn between leaving her with her team and reassigning her to take command of the Academy.

She was betting a lot on the former Team Eight, but she liked the odds.

There was a knock at the door and Tsunade looked up. The list of people allowed to do that by the chuunin guards was very small. "Come in," she said.

Sarutobi Hiruzen walked in, trailed by his ever-present shadow. For a man who'd lost an arm and nearly died a few months ago, he was looking surprisingly healthy. He attributed it to enjoying his retirement, but Tsunade wasn't taking any chances. That was why she'd agreed to Haku's request to be assigned as the Sandaime's assistant. Part of his unspoken orders was to monitor the old man's health and make sure he was taking care of himself. Sentimentality aside, the village still needed his wisdom and political acumen. More, Tsunade needed him. She shuddered to think how many headaches the council would be without him acting as a buffer and advisor.

The old man had a faint smile on his face as he sat down in the chair beside her desk. Haku, as always, stood behind his right shoulder. Watching his back and protecting his weak side. Tsunade wondered if the ridiculously pretty young man realized he was doing it automatically. Hiruzen fumbled in his robes for a moment before frowning. The only argument she'd won with him was to get him to stop smoking. The risks after recovering from pneumonia, coupled with his age, were too great. It probably helped that his estranged son, Asuma, had also given up smoking cigarettes for some reason, and that gave the two something in common to complain about. Now that the father was no longer Hokage, the two would sometimes be seen together playing shogi. As someone that had lost her own family, Tsunade had bitter feelings toward anyone who squandered opportunities she no longer had. She pursed her lips. "You're looking well," she observed.

"I'm feeling well, all things considered," the old man said. "I haven't seriously coughed, aside from when I first wake up, in over two weeks."

Tsunade nodded. "We can schedule another scan next week then. I'd like to make sure all the pulmonary scarring is gone. But you didn't come here, voluntarily, to discuss your health."

The Professor smiled. "No, I was wondering what you thought about the Raikage's proposal."

Tsunade sighed. "I don't suppose I should even ask how you already know about that."

"People talk, even in a Hidden Village," he replied. "Hiashi did not look happy as he was leaving the tower, so I assume you are going ahead with this?"

"Hiashi is never happy," Tsunade observed sourly. "But the Raikage's guarantees seem solid. He really wants to get a look at my cards."

Hiruzen nodded. "And not just him," he added. "If Suna sends Baki's team, his brother will get a chance to meet or at least observe two people of personal interest."

Tsunade nodded. He hadn't spelled it out in front of Haku, no matter how trustworthy the boy was. But she knew the Raikage's adopted brother was the jinchuuriki of the eight-tails and mentor to the jinchuuriki of the two-tails. Rumor had it that Killer B both exerted an unusual degree of control over his bijuu and was extremely loyal to his brother, the Raikage. "I hadn't considered that," she admitted. "Do you think it will be a problem?"

"I think," Hiruzen answered, "that there will still be more to gain than to lose. I don't think we have any reason to be concerned about loyalties."

"And Suna?" Tsunade pressed. If Konoha sent even one team, Suna likely would as well.

"That's an interesting situation," her predecessor observed with a small smile. "You may want to give Naruto some official recognition for asking Jiraiya to take a look at young Gaara's seal. The difference after he repaired it is quite remarkable. I have even heard that young Gaara has decided to adopt Naruto's grand ambition for his own."

"He wants to become the Kazekage?" Tsunade asked, a little incredulous.

"As his father was before him," Hiruzen reminded her. "His siblings are also making it publicly known that he was previously suffering from a damaged seal. There haven't been any incidents since he returned, so people are slowly coming to accept this."

Tsunade leaned back in her chair. "You're awfully well informed," she observed.

Hiruzen smiled. "People know I'm your advisor," he said, "and they are used to me having the highest clearance. Please don't take it as a slight directed toward you."

"I'm not," she assured him. "I just wonder how many others enjoy such access."

"Homura and Koharu are officially, *and unofficially,* retired now," Hiruzen said with a sigh. "They knew this was likely, since they never really got on well with you or Jiraiya. But they still supported either of you as the strongest candidates to lead Konoha."

"I know, and I never doubted their patriotism," Tsunade assured him. "But you haven't included Shimura Danzo in that category."

Hiruzen shook his head. "He has always done what he thought best, damn the consequences." He paused. "That's one reason I came to

see you. I think participating in this chuunin examination is a good idea, but I don't think you should leave the village unattended right now."

"What do you mean?" she asked. "Wouldn't that be a huge sign of disrespect if the village kage doesn't attend?"

"Not as long as *a* Hokage attends," he replied. "I could say I asked a personal favor since I know most of the genin involved, and missed the chance to see them advance."

Tsunade mulled this over. "This has some possibilities," she conceded. "I was worried what they might get up to while I was away."

"Aside from that, you definitely don't want to let the paperwork build up," Hiruzen reminded her, earning him a very dirty look.

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Naruto could barely restrain himself as he fidgeted next to Jiraiya. They stood in a slow-moving line queued up to a large gate. Part of him wanted to leap on top of that gate and shout that he was back. Two things stopped him from doing this.

One, people would think he was an idiot, and might attack him since he was dressed as a nondescript traveler. No sense giving the chuunin gate guards something to be nervous about. The second was that Jiraiya offered to handle the initial report and debriefing solo… If, and only if, Naruto could avoid breaking cover the rest of the way home. Just his luck the old degenerate would count such an action as a failure.

Naruto wasn't dumb. He knew Jiraiya wanted to discuss some things privately with the Hokage. But he had things he'd rather do than cool his heels in the hallway while they did that. Hot showers, Ichiraku Ramen, and finding his friends were all on his list, in no particular order.

Besides, the stuff concealing his whisker-shaped birth marks was staring to itch!

So he fidgeted quietly, looking around like any young man visiting a hidden village for the first time might do. Finally, their turn came and Jiraiya shuffled closer to one of the chuunin manning the checkpoint and briefly showed him something Naruto couldn't see. Whatever was concealed by Jiraiya's bulk got the guard's attention in a hurry. He wasn't screaming, so Naruto assumed he hadn't been flashed. What the guard did do was escort them through the gate with no more questions.

As they passed through, Naruto looked around again, relaxing a little. It was gratifying that he couldn't see a single trace of the botched invasion anymore. Most of the major damage was repaired before he left, but now he couldn't see anything to indicate the battle had even occurred. Even the repaired sections of wall had been weathered to match the rest. He smiled and cleared his throat.

"Yeah, kid, I heard you," Jiraiya drawled lazily. "You managed not to foul it up too badly, so I guess you can go."

Naruto made a hurt face. "So mean!" he huffed. "I guess Clothahump-sama was right about you after all…"

"What did that ambulatory soup bowl say-" Jiraiya's howl of outrage was cut off when he realized he was addressing the rapidly receding backside of his apprentice. Instead, he chuckled and shook his head as he turned and strolled toward the Hokage's tower.

Naruto scratched at his cheek as he weighed his options. He really need to stow his travelling pack and disguise, and his face itch was getting worse, so he decided to go home first. Then he could hit Ichiraku's and keep an eye out for his team. If that didn't work, he was sure he could ask at the Aburames. He smiled when he remembered the first clan to openly support him. It made him wonder if his parents would have been anything like Shibi and Misato. His mother teased Shino a lot, but it was always playful, and anyone

could see that she adored both him and her husband. Naruto couldn't help but envy the taller boy, just a little bit. Fortunately, he could also sense that Shino was aware of just how lucky he was.

His mood was already a little melancholy by the time he reached the residential district, and the sight of the Yuuhi homestead added a pang of sorrow. He was quiet as he fished out his keys and let himself into the silent abode. The house was still, but not as dusty as he feared. He hoped Hinata was able to stay here if Tsunade gave her a break. Of course, that didn't sound too likely from Jiraiya's words. He was relieved to see Mr. Ukko and the other house plants were doing well, thriving even.

Naruto smiled as he unpacked and stowed his equipment. He knew that if he asked Hinata to look after his plants, they'd be fine. If it also got her used to coming around when she otherwise felt she would be intruding, all the better. Kurenai-sensei meant for this to be a haven for her as well.

He thought again about his sensei's last letter as he ran a shower as hot as he could stand. Sensei's words regarding Hinata's feelings haunted him. She… loved him? Really? Every time he contemplated that, his stomach dropped towards his feet. It was such a… big thing. He had no idea how to even think about it. Did he love her back? He didn't know. Couldn't know. He'd never had anyone love him before, at least not that he was aware of. He knew Kurenai-sensei cared about him. She cared about all of her genin. Could you love more than one person? Or was it just really strong like? He loved Ichiraku's ramen, but he wouldn't trade someone's life for it. Well, maybe Orochimaru's.

Why the hell didn't they teach people about this in the Academy? Why hadn't Kurenai?

But even as he rinsed the shampoo away, ignoring the tears of frustration, he realized he already knew the answer. Normal kids, ones with parents and families, didn't need to be taught this stuff. Their families taught them. He growled and smacked his head

against the tiles in frustration. This all came back to the Kyuubi and the way he'd been isolated all his life. Well, he wasn't going to let that get him down. He'd just have to get the answers himself.

After all, he'd kept Iruka's Secret a secret, so his former instructor owed him one. Or two.

Cheering up at actually having a plan of action, Naruto finished rinsing off. He dried off and took great pleasure in dressing in a clean uniform. But as he exited the bedroom, he stopped. The front door was standing slightly open, and there was someone laying on the floor of the foyer. He edged cautiously forward and his heart gave a lurch when he realized it was Hinata.

In a flash, he was kneeling beside the fallen kunoichi and scooping her up. There was no sign of blood or injury. He had her deposited on the couch before she began to stir. He gently shook her shoulder, but flinched back when her eyes snapped open.

"N-Naruto-kun?" she gasped.

"Er, yeah. I'm back," he announced lamely. "Jiraiya is reporting to the Hokage, so I came here for a shower before I went looking for everyone. Looks like you found me first!" he added. "Um. What happened though?"

Hinata's face flushed red. "Oh. I was c-coming to water the plants when I thought I heard someone, so I activated…" her voice trailed off and if anything her face went even darker.

"Oh? Oh!" Naruto said, looking left and right, anywhere but at his mortified friend. "I noticed you did a really good job. Mr. Ukko has never looked better!" he babbled. "Want to get some ramen?" he added after a moment. "My treat? You can tell me what everyone has been up to…"

Hinata nodded quickly.

But before they left, Naruto had a small task. Hinata watched as he quickly prepared a pot of green tea and brought it to the study. Hinata trailed behind him, mystified, carrying a tray and a single cup at his request. They placed their burdens on the small table next to an overstuffed chair and a set of overflowing bookshelves.

Then Naruto knelt and with his palm on the floor, molded a shockingly immense amount of chakra. "Summoning no Jutsu: The Elder," he called out as mist burst forth from under his hand. When the mist cleared, they were joined by a short, stooped figure.

"Clothahump?" Naruto asked. "I'd like you to meet Hyuuga Hinata, my friend and teammate."

"Ah," the old turtle rasped. "I have heard so much about you. It is a rare pleasure to finally make your acquaintance."

Hinata bowed deeply, her face coloring again. "I am honored to meet you."

"Such a polite young lady," Clothahump murmured approvingly. He looked around, rheumy eyes peering through the enormous tortoiseshell spectacles. "So is this your home, Naruto?"

"It is," Naruto confirmed. "We are back in Konoha now. This is the house that was left to me by Kurenai-sensei. When we discussed her… her love of books, you said you wished you could have read some of them. So I thought…"

Clothahump smiled, looking over at the bookshelves and the steaming pot of tea. "Bless you, my boy! This is a rare treat. I haven't had any new reading material since Jon-Tom's last visit."

Naruto squirmed, a little uncomfortable at the praise. Then he glanced at Hinata, and her approving smile made him feel… smart. Like Kurenai-sensei used to do. He smiled back.

Teuchi was really happy to see Naruto had returned. So happy, in fact, that he left his broth unattended to come out from behind the counter and hug the embarrassed genin.

"It's so good to see you back!" the ramen chef beamed. "I have a bunch of new ideas I want you to try out!" He coughed a little when Ayame elbowed him. "Once you've gotten settled in, of course." He added.

Naruto laughed out loud. "You're right. I'm so happy to be back here, you could serve mop water and I'd think it was great." He paused. "You have no idea what passes for ramen in some of the places I've been." He added with a shudder. "I even had it at the one place where they served it ice cold. I thought I was in hell."

"That's an abomination!" Teuchi agreed.

"Jiraiya called it Hiyashi Chuka," Naruto added, "but I just called it nasty. They said it wasn't supposed to be warm. I mean, what is the point? I don't care if it's hot outside, Ramen is supposed to be hot!"

"Some people will never understand," Teuchi added in a solemn tone. "Sounds like you need a Naruto Protein Special, on the house!" he added.

"A Naruto Protein Special?" Naruto asked, his eyes going wide.

Ayame smiled. "Hinata had some suggestions a couple of months ago, so we incorporated them into a new dish." She winked. "The name was her idea."

Naruto turned toward his teammate. "Hinata?"

The Hyuuga was turning decidedly pink again, but her voice was steady. "Tsunade-sensei and Shizune-sempai had me reviewing the basics of nutritional theory," she explained. "I realized that while you do need carbohydrates, you were not getting enough protein and other nutrients with your preferred diet. This is especially true when

you are training. I explained my findings to Ayame and we came up with some extra toppings to address this, while also reducing the overall sodium content. Once we worked this out, we brought it to Shizune-sempai and she approved it as being a healthy meal-substitute for active-duty Konoha shinobi."

"That means we get to put a little stamp next to it on the menu," Ayame added. "And word got around. It costs a little more because of the ingredients, but our ninja customers are more than happy to pay a small premium. And civilians who want to eat healthier ramen have picked up on this as well. It's one of our best-selling items now."

Naruto turned back to Hinata, eyes wide and mouth opening and closing soundlessly.

"Naruto?" Hinata asked in a tremulous voice. "Is it all right that we named it after you?" All the confidence she'd exhibited when discussing the nutritional content of the new dish was gone. In fact, she looked almost on the verge of tears and Ayame was starting to scowl.

"All right?" Naruto asked. "All right? Hinata, you got a new type of ramen named in my honor! You absolutely rock!"

Hinata let out a sigh of relief, but added a sudden squeak when Naruto hugged her hard enough to lift her off her feet.

"Best. Homecoming. Ever." He whispered in the shivering girl's ear, still grinning like a loon.

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Naruto was just finishing his Protein Special when Hinata sat up with a smile. A moment later, a familiar voice rang out.

"Naruto! You have returned! Have you been fanning the Flames of your Youth?"

Naruto slurped down the last of the broth. "Hai! Gai-sensei!" he called out after wiping his mouth. As he turned on the stool, Team Gai, along with Shino, stepped up to the counter.

"We can take a break now," Maito Gai announced. "Five Naruto Protein Specials for my most excellent team and their equally excellent addition!" he boomed as he stepped up to the counter. The rest of his team shuffled after him at different speeds. Rock Lee was only half a step behind his sensei, and brimming with energy as usual. Neji, Tenten, and Shino all looked rather worse for the wear. Tenten let out a low moan as she finally sat down, and began kneading her right thigh muscles with one hand, wincing. Neji had bruises visible on his unbandaged arm and Shino leaned forward resting his elbows on the bar, back sagging in obvious exhaustion.

"Tough mission?" Naruto asked sympathetically.

"Tora," the genin announced with a groan.

Naruto's eyes bugged out. "The Fire Lady's cat?" he asked incredulously. Sometimes it was a pain to retrieve the furball, but… "Seriously?"

"Gai-sensei comes up with the best ways to make a mission challenging!" Lee crowed proudly.

The look Tenten gave her teammate should have shaved years off his life.

Naruto ordered a miso ramen as he listened to their story. He shuddered several times at their collective tale of woe. Gai was silent, concentrating on his food as they talked. But when they finished, he spoke up. "Naruto," he asked, "have you been keeping up with your taijutsu training while you were on your trip?"

Naruto nodded solemnly, glad that he'd anticipated this question. "I took Kabuto's naginata away from him last week. He says that I will be ready to spar with The Four soon."

Gai's eyes widened for a moment, then he gave an enormous grin and a thumbs up. "You are truly exploding with youth! I look forward to you rejoining us in the mornings!"

Neji slumped as Hinata patted him sympathetically on the shoulder. Tenten groaned aloud and thumped her forehead against Shino's arm.

Shino merely sighed and adjusted his sunglasses. "Physical discomfort aside, it is pleasant to see you safely returned from your training sabbatical."

Naruto grinned. He'd missed Shino too.

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Umino Iruka had already heard that Naruto had returned to Konoha. Konohamaru was bursting with the news from his grandfather that his "eternal rival" had finally returned to the village. But he himself was ambivalent about running into his former student. Of course, it would be great to see him again, and he wanted to hear all about his training trip. On the other hand, he was well aware that Naruto had kept quiet about Iruka's embarrassing acquisition. The news hadn't broken until a good three months after the boy had left. Someone noticed something on the tax receipts, and it was forwarded up the line, culminating in the single most embarrassing meeting with a Hokage of the young chuunin's career.

Fortunately, Tsunade-sama possessed a sense of humor, and was willing to let him explain how the whole thing came about. Of course, it didn't help that she was clearly struggling to keep a straight face by the time he finished. She just asked him to let her in on the action next time. But the damage was already done. Yugao wouldn't even acknowledge his existence for the better part of a month, until Hayate-sempai explained that Iruka hadn't really done anything wrong. Worse were the reactions of his former students. Yamanaka Ino found the whole thing hilarious, and never missed an opportunity to bring it up. Inuzuka Kiba had entirely the wrong idea, and worse, his older sister had taken to eyeing Iruka in a very unsettling manner.

But no matter how things turned out, Iruka had to admit that Naruto had kept his mouth shut. And as a former prankster, Iruka knew sitting on something so juicy meant that he owed Naruto a favor. And the most unpredictable ninja he knew just had six months to think about it.

Iruka knew nothing good could come of this.

So he was resigned to his fate when he saw Naruto waiting for him after classes had let out for the day. "Good to see you back, Naruto," he said brightly. Obligations or not, the blonde terror still held a place in his heart. Even if he was likely to end up defacing the Hokage monument before the day was out.

"Want to get some ramen?' Naruto asked, "My treat?"

Iruka had faced death before on missions, so he suppressed the sudden spasm of fear with a stoicism borne of hard experience. "Sure… what's the occasion?" he asked nonchalantly as they left the Academy grounds.

"Well, I'm back… and Kurenai-sensei said I shouldn't take advantage of peoples' generosity, so I figure I owe you more than a few bowls…"

Iruka frowned. He reached out and carefully laid a hand on Naruto's shoulder. "You know, while what she said may be generally true, she was wrong."

Naruto's head snapped around in surprise. It took no small amount of will for Iruka not to react. "Yuuhi Kurenai was an excellent jonin," he said slowly, "and a great sensei. But she had her own ideas about things, and I don't think she was always right about everything. I wasn't just being generous, Naruto. If I offered to buy you ramen, it was solely for the pleasure of your company." He took a deep breath, noting Naruto's expression growing troubled. "I'm not saying you should question everything she said, but you should keep an open mind and make your own decisions. All right?"

Naruto nodded as they continued walking. "I guess that's part of why I wanted to talk to you," he said after a moment. "I need some advice about something, sensei."

Iruka was touched. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all. "Naruto, I'm always here for you," he said quietly.

Naruto nodded. "What is love? How do you know if you love someone? And what if one person loves someone that doesn't love them back?"

Iruka stumbled. He realized that defacing the monument wouldn't have been so bad after all.

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Iruka picked at his pork ramen as he considered Naruto's dilemma. Part of him couldn't help being irritated at Yuuhi Kurenai and the problem she'd dropped in his lap. From what he'd gathered, she'd 'spilled the beans' to Naruto in some form of posthumous letter to be opened in case she died. He was familiar with the concept of 'dead-mail' – his own will contained a few sealed personal messages. One was even addressed to the young genin sitting next to him.

But Iruka wondered why she would leave such a message without laying any ground work for its comprehension. Maybe she'd planned to do so, but hadn't the time. However, such an oversight didn't really mesh with the unflinching realist that he remembered. It wasn't that she was a pessimist so much as she didn't believe things would work out in the end if she didn't make them. What would make her break the news to an unprepared Naruto? Everyone else who knew of Hinata's crush was willing to let it develop on its own schedule, to let her develop the courage to tell Naruto on her own.

Looking at it that way made Iruka wonder what she knew that he did not. He sighed. Waiting wasn't going to make this any easier.

"Love is one of the strongest emotions people can feel," he began in a low voice. "It happens when you care about someone so much that

their well-being and happiness is more important to you than your own. It's a powerful force in peoples' lives. It can inspire someone to incredible heroics. It has also been the root of some of the most depraved evil ever committed."

Iruka realized that he'd fallen into his lecturing cadence, but for once Naruto seemed totally focused on his words. "As for how you know, it comes down to the definition I gave you. If you had to make a decision that would make you miserable, but would lead to her happiness, would you do it?"

"I… I think so," Naruto mumbled.

"You need to know, Naruto," Iruka reminded him gently. "Say… her family was relocating to Suna. Would you tell her to go with them, or ask her to stay in Konoha, even if you knew she would miss them?"

"I don't think she'd want to go with them," Naruto replied. The certainty in his voice resounded with other things the chuunin had heard, or guessed. It was leading him to some unpleasant places.

"Assume she gets along with them better," Iruka suggested, "and you know she would miss her sister horribly if they were parted."

Naruto stared off into space, his miso ramen cooling. "Suna is an ally again, so it's not likely we'd ever have to fight," he said slowly. Iruka was impressed that he'd considered that for a hypothetical exercise. "I guess I could send a message to Gaara… ask him if he and his brother and sister could watch out for her," he said slowly. Naruto's face was slowly crumpling into a study in misery, and Iruka was ashamed to realize he was a little shocked. "I guess I'd tell her to go be with her family," the boy concluded.

Iruka looked down at his food. He honestly hadn't thought Naruto capable of that depth of feeling. Clearly his former student was growing up faster than he'd realized. "Well, it's a good thing that's not the case," he reminded his friend. "Because if that's true, then you

do have some deep feelings for her. But there's all kinds of love, Naruto."

"There's different kinds?" the genin asked, clearly dismayed.

Iruka nodded and took a bite of his cooling ramen. "Don't you think a mother can love her child? Do you think that's the same kind of love she feels for her husband?"

Naruto shook his head. "No, but this is more complicated than I thought."

"That's all right, Naruto," Iruka assured him, "I think you've already done the hard part. You do remember the special seminar you attended with the other boys in your class?"

Naruto nodded, visibly shuddering.

"Good," Iruka said quickly. He gave a small grin. "If I told the Hokage you'd forgotten, she would likely send you to refresher training… I wonder if that's something she'd assign to her junior apprentice?"

Naruto's face turned crimson and he shot Iruka a look of pure betrayal.

"All right," Iruka replied calmly, "so you do know she's a girl. Do you find her attractive?"

Naruto slowly nodded, still silent.

Iruka frowned. "What do you find most physically attractive about her? Take your time, and don't be crude," he warned.

Naruto's face molded into a thoughtful frown. Finally he said, "I like the way she moves," in little more than an embarrassed whisper.

"The way she moves?" Iruka asked.

"Yeah… she's… when she walks, it's like she's barely touching the ground," Naruto said, "and when we spar, she's so graceful, it's like she's dancing and nothing can touch her… and then she lays a fingertip on you and BOOM, you've been Jyuuken-blasted across the clearing." His words sped up as he warmed to the topic and found his voice. "It's like that with everything she does. She can stick hunks of deer on a skewer when she's cooking, but when she does it she's so delicate and so precise." He lowered his voice. "Sometimes I think I could watch her all day long."

Iruka swallowed. He'd started this conversation worried that Naruto had never really noticed Hinata. Shows how much he knew.

"But it's not just physical," Naruto continued. "It's like… she's graceful in everything. She doesn't want her friends to fight, so she's always playing peacemaker. She didn't want me to be embarrassed when we met Shino's parents, so she showed me exactly how to act. She doesn't want anyone to hurt, so she's always carrying around this balm she makes for when we train. And now she's training to be a medic-nin, because she's… she's always trying to ease the path for others. She's amazing," he concluded.

There was silence as they both looked away, then ate some more of their dinner.

Finally, Iruka broke the silence. "Naruto?"

"Yes?"

"Feelings may change over time, but I think it's safe to say that you love her."

"Oh. Good. Thank you, sensei."

Iruka nodded and patted his friend on the back. He couldn't really call him a boy anymore, could he?

Naruto finished his ramen first, of course. He nodded to Iruka in a distracted manner before leaving enough money for both their meals and slipping away into the evening foot traffic.

Iruka jumped a little when Teuchi retrieved Naruto's bowl for the wash. "I heard everything with the burners turned off," he said, "Nice talk."

Iruka shrugged, a little embarrassed in spite of himself.

"As the father of a very pretty girl," Teuchi said with some authority, "I wish every boy she meets had someone give them the talk you just did."

Iruka didn't even try to stop the pleased flush that rose up his neck.

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Shino wasn't surprised to see his teammate lingering near the boundary of the Aburame complex. He knew that Naruto was not on the mission rotation since his return, ostensibly so he could refamiliarize himself with Konoha and any changes that may have occurred in his absence. It was also entirely possible that his new teacher was in need of prolonged downtime after a sustained interval of intensive instruction.

If that meant Naruto had the opportunity to greet former comrades while Jiraiya went on a bender, he was not one to judge. His mother was more than up to the task.

However, he had already spoken to Naruto at length the evening of his first day back. He had also witnessed a green blur that answered to the name "Naruto" during Gai's morning training sessions. Those facts left him unsure as to why his teammate would seek him out at this point in time.

"Naruto," he greeted his teammate.

"Hey Shino," the blonde replied in an unusually subdued tone. "Can we talk a minute?"

"I was assigned to team Ten today," Shino said, "so I am not in immediate need of sustenance or rest." His temporary teammates complained bitterly about Asuma becoming a 'slave driver' after the chuunin exams. Shino, having experienced the Madness of Gai, begged to differ.

Naruto nodded, but Shino doubted he had fully processed the words. Something of serious import seemed to be occupying his comrade's mind.

"I… I've been doing some thinking," Naruto began.

"An admirable occupation," Shino remarked in what he hoped was an encouraging manner.

"About Hinata," Naruto clarified and Shino went very still. "I… I'm pretty sure I like her."

"Like?" Shino asked. "What is not to like? She is a skilled kunoichi with an extremely pleasant demeanor. Her training in medical ninjutsu will make her an extremely valuable comrade to have."

"No, no," Naruto interrupted, waving his hands, "Not like that. I mean, yes, she's awesome, and I know she's been working hard and-"

"Then how do you mean it?" Shino asked, interrupting him back.

"I… I'm pretty sure I love her," Naruto said, looking down. Shino wondered if he was expecting some sort of approbation.

"I see. How do you intend to make use of this… revelation?"

"I'm not sure," Naruto admitted, "I'm… you're not mad?"

"Why would I be angry?" Shino asked.

"Well, I didn't know if maybe you liked her too," Naruto explained, shrugging his shoulders defensively.

"While I hold our teammate in high esteem, and value her contributions to the group as a whole, I am not given toward fruitless pursuits," Shino replied.

"Fruitless?" Naruto asked, clearly confused.

"Are you aware of her feelings toward you?" Shino asked carefully.

Naruto blushed and nodded.

"I was aware of her preference from the start," Shino said. "As such, while I valued the friendship that developed, I knew that desiring anything more from her would be a hopeless endeavor."

"You knew?" Naruto asked.

"Naruto, I am fairly certain that everyone in our Academy class knew," he clarified.

"You all knew?" Naruto gasped. "Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"Most did not feel it was their place," Shino explained. "Or they hoped Hinata would overcome her shyness enough to be able to tell you herself. Her feelings seemed to be fairly obvious, so many took it as proof that you were extremely clueless or simply did not care. I have since concluded it was more the former than the latter."

Naruto sighed. "Shino, I grew up alone. I had to have Iruka-sensei explain to me, just now, how to tell if I liked her *that way* ."

Shino paused as he considered this. "That is not something I had fully realized the ramifications of, relevant to this situation. I can only offer that myself, like many others, hesitated to intervene because we feared to make an already uncomfortable situation worse."

Naruto cocked his head. "You were worried about Hinata getting hurt? I guess I can understand that. So are we cool?"

Shino nodded, and felt the tightness in his shoulders relax. He had not even registered tensing up during this conversation, which he found odd. "What are your plans going forward?" he asked.

"Well, I need to talk to Hinata," Naruto said. "Things have been messed up long enough because no one was talking. That needs to stop."

Shino nodded. "I think she will be pleased at this course of action."

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Tsunade leaned back in her chair as all of the active Jonin-sensei filed into the conference room. They were quiet, for the most part, so word had probably spread that this was going to be a serious meeting. When they were all in, the door shut. Tsunade stood as Jiraiya activated the room's security seals.

"Jonin," she began, "we have a rare opportunity before us. The Raikage has extended a personal invitation for Konoha to attend the Kumo chuunin exams in two weeks. His offer is phrased as an offer to foster good relations after our own examinations were disrupted, but we think his primary objective is first-hand observation of our new crop of genin."

"Then why give him a peek?" Kakashi drawled, not looking up from his book. His legendary tardiness was in steep decline after the last chuunin exam, and Tsunade knew when to pick her battles. At least his bad habits weren't interfering with training his team anymore. Her reports indicated the last Uchiha was also training on his own at an almost obsessive pace, but he wasn't completely leaving his teammates in the dust anymore.

"Deterrence," Tsunade replied with a smirk, "and marketing. Kumo's best clients will be watching the finals. If our genin can make a

strong showing, we can set the tone for interactions between Konoha and Kumo for the next decade."

"Won't the Raikage know this?" Asuma asked, frowning. "I've heard he's kind of a musclehead, but I've never heard him described as stupid."

"Our best psychological assessment," Nara Shikaku replied, "indicates that's he's more comfortable with known threats. He'd rather hand us a potential advantage if it reduces the chance of us blindsiding him in the future."

"That said," Tsunade continued, "we need to make the most of this opportunity. I want every jonin-sensei to think long and hard. Do not nominate your team as a learning experience for them. Your teams did well in the last exam, but we want to make a show of strength. I only want teams that you honestly think can dominate the opposition."

"My brats are ready," Kakashi said. "We'd have to lock them up if they found out they weren't going."

"I think Team Asuma will sit this one out," Sarutobi Asuma said. "They're not all quite where I'd like them to be. I think Shikamaru is ready for the responsibility, but his tactical acumen won't play that well for a crowd of civilians. Shinobi would see too much."

Tsunade nodded, ignoring the small sigh of relief she heard from Shikaku's direction.

Maito Gai was next. "Team Gai is more than ready to demonstrate the Power of Youth!"

Jiraiya cleared his throat, garnering the attention of many in the room. "And I will nominate Team Jir-… ah, the hell with it. I nominate Team 8."

Tsunade ignored the shocked, but approving looks her old teammate was getting. "Very well. I'd like to inform you of another break from tradition. My predecessor, the Sandaime, has petitioned to be allowed to take my place at the Kumo examinations. After due consideration of the security and political ramifications, I have decided to approve this petition."

She was surprised to see Asuma look surprised. Evidently, Hiruzen hadn't even discussed this with his son, which impressed her a bit.

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Jiraiya was waiting for them as Gai-sensei was finishing his latest version of cool-down exercises. He strode up as their morning Taijutsu practice ended. "I need to see all three of you," the older man rumbled, then turned and left the training ground – clearly expecting them to follow.

Naruto didn't say a word. He knew Jiraiya was not a morning person, and when circumstances forced it, better to not give the Toad Hermit any arguments. He led them to a small tea shop that was just opening. Naruto didn't know if the owner would have objected to his presence if he'd come alone. Fortunately, he wasn't the only person smart enough to not argue with a grumpy Jiraiya.

The first cup of hot tea didn't seem to improve the older man's mood very much, but he started talking anyway. "There's a mission. There is a chuunin examination coming up in Kumo in two weeks. The Hokage thinks you're ready. I think you're ready. If you think you're ready, we'll go there and you'll kick the crap out of everyone in your way and come back with three flak vests." He coughed and took another long sip of his tea. "Are you up for it? I have to ask."

Naruto and Shino turned toward Hinata, who was already nodding. They turned back and nodded as well.

"If you keep doing that in unison, I'm going to hurt you," Jiraiya groused.

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After they were dismissed, Naruto walked with Hinata to the Hokage's tower. She was just finishing her six months of "indentured servitude" to the Hokage, so this trip to Kumo had come just in time. Her break from living in the Hyuuga compound was nearing its end, so she welcomed any excuse to postpone returning.

She glanced over at her teammate. Naruto was unusually quiet today. In fact, after his first day back, he'd seemed… rather pensive. She wondered what was bothering him. He'd appeared pleased about the Naruto Protein Special named in his honor. Had she done something wrong?

So lost in thought was the Hyuuga that she almost flinched away when she felt warm fingers wrap around her hand, interlacing with hers. She turned her head toward Naruto, who was looking away and blushing in a manner that she found absolutely adorable. "N-Naruto-kun?" she asked, damning the quaver in her voice.

"I, uh, I missed you, a lot, you know, when I was away," Naruto said, ducking his head and looking down.

Hinata felt her heart hammering in her chest. She was amazed it wasn't drowning out her own voice. "I missed you too," she managed to say.

"I'm not really sure how to say this," Naruto admitted, "but I really like you."

"I like you too, Naruto," she replied without thinking. How had she done that so easily? Did he really mean it like it sounded?

Naruto swallowed. "Would you like to, you know, date, I guess? I mean to say, would you like to be my, er, girlfriend?" Naruto was obviously struggling with his words, and the last one came out as little more than a whisper.

Hinata felt her eyes bulge as her face heated. She'd wondered, dreamed, even, about this happening. But now that it was

happening, she felt her doubts multiply. Could she be a good girlfriend? What if her father found out? What if Naruto grew tired of her? Would she drag him down to her level?

But as she hesitated, Naruto looked up, and she found herself lost in the blue of his eyes. She saw someone she knew was just as alone as she was, and she knew she could deny him nothing. "Yes, I would," she said softly.

Naruto pulled her into a hug, softer than his previous, more exuberant ones, and time seemed to stop. His warmth melted all her doubts away, so why did she feel like crying?

Author Notes:

I know it's been a long time coming – I hope you found it satisfying to finally hear it. Yes, Naruto took a long time to think about it, but he had to deal with the grief from Kurenai's death before he could even begin processing the contents of the letter.

I'd like to thank Runsamok, Tempest, and Torbin for their feedback and support. I'd also like to thank my supporters for making the debut of Rhiyen's Deal work. Someone suggested that I create a teaser blurb for it, so here goes:

When a teenage malcontent is targeted by a corrupt principal, he makes a deal with two nerdy classmates. He protects them from bullies, they help him pass his classes. But soon his problems expand from staying in school to solving the mysterious disappearances that plague Glenridge. Can a trio of outcasts discover the truth before they vanish into the night?

As mentioned before, this original story is available only on my site: viridiandreams